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The illustration depicts a young man with short, dark blue hair and golden-yellow eyes, wearing a dark blue tunic with a white collar and a yellow sash. He is holding a green, bulbous plant with a long stem. Behind him, a young woman with long, flowing blonde hair and green eyes is smiling. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with a ruffled collar and a green apron. The background is a lush forest with tall trees and a small wooden building in the distance. The title 'Monster Tamer 7' is written in a large, stylized font at the bottom.

Monster Tamer 7



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Monster Tamer 7

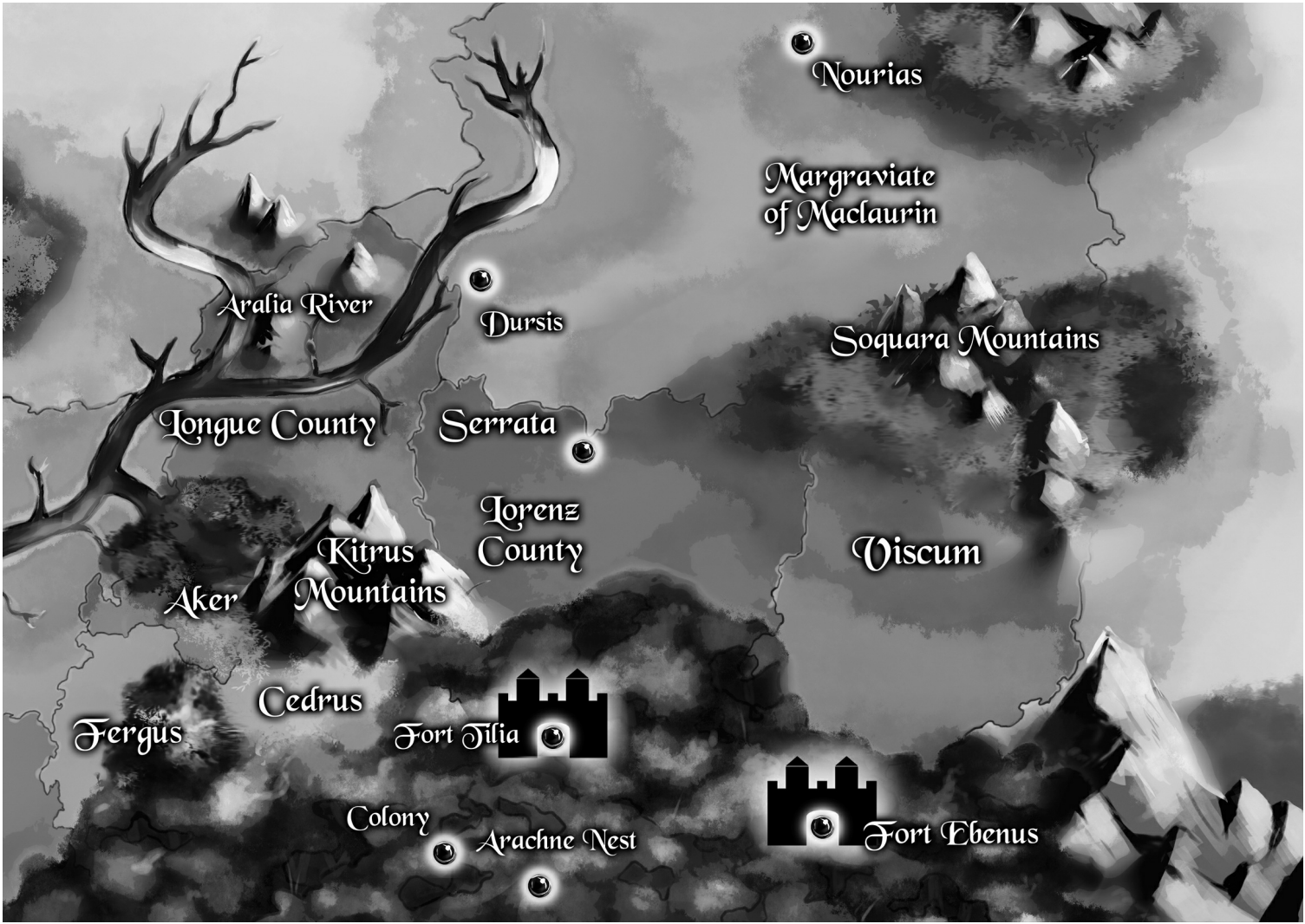


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Chapter 1: The Boy in Faraway Lands *Kaneki*

Mikihiko's POV

The sound of metal clashing against metal drummed within the depths of my ears.

“Ugh. Hghh...”

Using the two shortswords in my hands, I fended off the blade coming at me. My opponent was armed with a single longsword. It had a little more range than my weapons, meaning I was naturally forced to defend rather than strike. I wanted to close the distance between us to get into range, but my opponent was more skilled than me, so it wasn't easy. As we continued our bout, the impact of his strikes slowly pummeled the feeling out of my hands.

“Ooooooh!”

I already had no chance of winning. I knew that, but I hung in there. There were goals I couldn't reach if I gave up now. I couldn't protect the things most important to me unless I exerted myself to my very limit, so I grit my teeth and swung my swords.

How much time had passed already? Whenever I played games in my room, time always flew by without my realizing it. However, right here and now, it felt like a tremendous amount of time had passed in mere moments.

“Ah!”

A particularly hard blow knocked the shortsword out of my numbed hand. Armed with only one remaining weapon, I couldn't even last a few more seconds.

“Y-You got me, Marcus,” I said, falling to my butt. I looked up at the training sword pointed at my eyes.

“That is to say the match is mine, Mikihiko?”

“I give up! I surrender! I'm done!”

He finally lowered his sword. The tension vanished from the air, and I plopped down onto my back. My other training sword tumbled from my palm, and I looked up at the ridiculously blue sky.

“Man... A genuine knight sure is strong,” I grumbled.

“Ha ha. You’ve gotten rather strong yourself.”

“Hearing that from someone I couldn’t hit even once just makes me feel worse. It’d actually be better if you gloated.”

“You’re still a hundred years too early to get one up on me. Struggle all you want.”

“From one extreme to the other?!” I screamed as I sprang back up. I was quite the sore loser, so there was no way I could keep quiet. “Goddammit! I’m not gonna lose to you, asshole!”

I psyched up my exhausted body with pure willpower, only to be met with manly laughter.

“Okay, then! How about trying a spear this time?” Marcus suggested.

“Bring it on!”

I’d managed to build up some muscle lately, so I was trying all manner of weapons, not just shortswords. I gave Marcus a motivated nod, then turned around to go get a training spear.

“Hey, Mikihiko,” he suddenly said. “Let’s give it our all.”

I paused, but I didn’t turn back around. Then I nodded and ran off.

After the survivors of Fort Tilia’s fall, myself included, went to the trade city Serrata to inform them of the fort’s defeat, Margrave Maclaurin had arrested the commander. He’d left Serrata with the commander in tow three days after I split up with Takahiro’s group. About a month had passed since then.

I’d chosen to go with the convoy escorting the commander to the north. During that time, they hadn’t allowed me to see her at all. I’d used my status as a savior to twist some arms just to be part of the convoy, so I couldn’t push them any further. I passed my days alongside the one Alliance Knight assigned to take care of me while we were all under imperial watch. They hadn’t

restrained either of us, but they were definitely wary.

After the commander's arrest, I'd escaped Serrata. Because of that, Maclaurin had failed to secure all of the Alliance Knights. More importantly, Lieutenant Shiran had gotten away. We couldn't possibly allow her to fall into his grasp now that she was an undead monster. And honestly speaking, it felt good to stick it to the margrave.

The reason they hadn't allowed me to meet the commander was probably because they were expecting me to break her out with the help of the missing knights. Well, I'd actually been secretly in contact with some of them, but we had no plans to break her out. That would just aggravate her situation. Regardless, Maclaurin was definitely worried about the possibility, and that was pretty much what had them on guard against us.

After a while, the provincial army caught up with us, and the commander's excessive military escort to the north carried on. The huge group moved at a slow pace. It had taken us ten days to leave Lorenz County and enter the granary regions of the Margraviate of Maclaurin's territory. We had then followed the northeast road to the city of Dursis, known as the southern Empire's grain storehouse. That had taken us another several days. Currently, we were headed toward the mining town of Nourias, located in the center of the margraviate. We were following the road running parallel to the grand Aralia River and found ourselves at a travelers' rest stop. It would take us one more week to get to Nourias, making our entire journey one month long.

They'd told me that to reach our ultimate destination, the imperial capital, it would take another month after reaching Nourias. I didn't know how long they planned on confining the commander in the capital. The margrave's people wouldn't give me a single detail. They probably hated me. Well, I hated them too, so it made us even.

In any case, I doubted our stay in the capital would be short. The attack on Fort Tilia was a major incident where humanity lost one of its strongholds. They were definitely going to request a detailed account of what had happened there and how much damage had been suffered.

After that, the commander would take responsibility for its capitulation. Just

as I'd told Takahiro and Shiran before we split up, execution was out of the question. The Akerian royal family was loved by its people. If their princess were to be executed for irrational reasons, it would definitely lead to war with the margraviate. The Holy Order, who fought on the battlefield alongside the saviors and maintained global order, wouldn't allow such meaningless chaos. No matter how much the margrave hated the commander, he couldn't sentence her to death.

That said, the weight of her punishment would be relative to the number of voices calling for her to take responsibility. That was where I would come in. The Holy Church's headquarters was located in the imperial capital. They revered the saviors, and had to have considerable influence. Being one such savior, in name anyway, there had to be something I could do for her. If so, even if the commander was sentenced to permanent house arrest, I could at least get her back to Aker...I hoped.

"It's gonna be a loooooong road," I grumbled.

I had to be patient. I ran over to the manamobile that carried our luggage and grabbed a stick with a cloth wrapped around the end used for spear training.

"I wonder when Takahiro's gonna reach Aker..." I whispered to myself.

Even if their journey was going well, they probably weren't there yet. I'd heard that the route through the Kitrus Mountains was fairly rough. Almost no one used it these days, and it was very likely that the miserable road conditions would block off their path completely. An unexpected accident could also occur.

Still, it was pretty much guaranteed that they would reach Aker before us. By the time they forced the commander to return home, he'd be there to greet us. I had to make sure I could smile when our reunion came.

Thus, I fired myself up once more and returned to my training.

Chapter 2: The Human Girls

“What are you looking at?” I asked the girl crouching by the riverside. Her eyes had been fixed on the object in her hand, but she looked up at me.

“Majima...”

Something about her reminded me of a flower. Her glamorous black hair spilled down to her waist. She wore a school uniform, but her slender proportions were still discernible. On the occasions that she smiled, her somewhat-sharp facial features carried a girly softness to them. Right now, though, she had a sullen and sour look on her face.

“Nothing really,” she said bluntly.

Iino Yuna—the girl known as the Skanda back in the Colony—huffed and averted her gaze. She was being rather unsociable, but that stood to reason. We’d crossed blades, after all.

The reason her uniform was a little worn and dirty was because of our scuffle at the time. Those were the only traces left of the battle, though. All of the wounds she’d suffered that day were fully healed now. Even the arm she’d broken during the fight with the Mad Beast—the monster Takaya Jun had transformed into—was back to normal.

She held a simple telescope in her hand. The magical puppet Rose, one of my servants, had made it.



“I found something nostalgic, so I was just taking a look,” lino said, putting the telescope back on the ground.

There was a pile of stuff at her feet, ranging from blankets to provisions. All of them were either wet, damaged, covered in mud, or all of the above. It was the luggage we’d been traveling with on our way to Aker. The river had washed it away, leaving it in its current state.

We’d been riding a manamobile that the Alliance Knights had lent us. During our battle with lino, the vehicle had tumbled down the cliff in a landslide and shattered to pieces. All of our stuff had washed away at the same time.

Now that lino was back in perfect health, she’d used her prided leg strength to run down the river to look for and retrieve our things. Thanks to her efforts, some of our luggage was now at her feet. The telescope she was looking at was one of the items she’d managed to recover.

“I have a friend who loves this stuff,” lino said, looking down at the telescope. “There was a time she forced a handmade telescope on me and made me look up at the stars. It’s still in my room...”

lino smiled nostalgically and stood up before turning my way and continuing.

“Her name is Todo...I mean, Todoroki Miya. Do you know her?”

“Todoroki?”

The sudden mention of her name troubled me somehow. I felt like I’d heard it somewhere before, but I couldn’t remember right away.

“She’s a member of the exploration team, Senpai.”

Another voice answered before I could figure it out. I turned around to see a girl with swaying pigtails—Katou—walking toward us. Her sleeves were rolled up, revealing her slender white arms. Beside her was a woman wearing a mask, her gray hair tied in a braid. It was Rose.

Rose was carrying wet items in her arms. The two of them had been using the river to wash the mud off of everything lino had retrieved. A little farther away, Gerbera and Kei were noisily enjoying the task as well. An arachne and an elf together was rather bizarre in this world, but the scene was idyllic in my eyes.

Rose lined up the clean items on a sheet by the riverside. Katou used a rag to dry them off, after which Rose began sorting them out.

“The Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya,” Katou said while continuing her work. “She was famous back in the Colony. I think she was in the same grade as you, Senpai.”

“Oh, right.”

Now I remembered. Even among the elite exploration team, which was made up entirely of cheaters who’d gained nonsensical powers upon arriving in this world, there were those who were known above all others. For example, the Sword of Light Nakajima Kojirou, the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji, the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya, and the girl right here before me, the Skanda Iino Yuna. It felt like ages ago now, but back in the Colony, I’d definitely heard of the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya.

“Hm?”

Just as I realized I’d heard that name, something got stuck on my mind.

“Is something the matter, Senpai?” Katou asked curiously.

“I feel like I heard that name somewhat recently,” I said, and after a few seconds, I remembered. “Takaya Jun... Right. He mentioned Todoroki.”

He’d brought up her name when we challenged him to get Lily back. When we were prodding him for information about Heaven’s Voice, the mysterious cheater hiding among the exploration team, Takaya Jun had mentioned Todoroki Miya’s name in a bid to shake Kudou.

Now that I thought of it, Iino, who had been riding on Berta’s back pretending to be Kudou at the time, had also reacted to her name. I’d thought maybe she knew who they were, but I hadn’t had the time to ask. After that, we’d gotten caught in a life-or-death battle, so it had totally slipped my mind. Iino’s reaction made sense if Todoroki Miya was an exploration team member. It didn’t seem like they were just fellow members either.

“Were you close to her?” I asked Iino.

“Yes,” she replied, her eyes drifting over to the telescope on the ground.

“That’s why I want to ask you something. You’re in contact with Kudou, right? Why did Takaya bring up Todo...? What is there between her and Kudou? Please, it doesn’t matter what it is, just tell me what you know.”

“I’m not really in contact with Kudou or anything,” I muttered. I knew what she was getting at, but I didn’t have the answers she was looking for. “We were enemies at Fort Tilia, and this time we hardly spoke at all. Sorry, but I don’t know anything about their involvement.”

“I see... Oh well,” she said with a dejected sigh.

“Hey, Iino. Did Todoroki...?”

“She wasn’t in the first expeditionary force. She stayed behind in the Colony.”

Based on her expression, I’d expected that answer.

“We didn’t leave the Colony helpless, just so you know,” she continued. “We left two nicknamed cheaters behind—The Beast of Darkness Todo, and the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji. So long as they were there, we figured we’d be ready for anything... That’s how it was supposed to be.”

She added on the last part because she knew what had happened in the end.

“‘Ready for anything’ only concerned monsters, right?” I said with a sigh. “The Colony self-destructed. It wasn’t a monster attack. It fell apart from the inside out.”

In the end, it was the exploration team’s leader, Nakajima Kojirou, who’d maintained our stable life at the Colony. It had been thanks to his charisma and leadership. There had still been discontent and anxiety while he was there, but his presence had checked any negative emotions. That was why everything had come pouring out when he left.

“Do you resent us?” Iino asked, sounding almost frightened.

“I don’t have a great opinion of all of you, but I don’t blame you for it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Blaming you doesn’t change what happened. Besides, I don’t think the exploration team’s decision was wrong back then.”

“What do you mean?”

“We had no future if we continued to stay in the Woodlands like that. However, a long-distance journey was impossible with the entire group. We would’ve had to dispatch an expeditionary force eventually.”

I set aside my emotions and continued in an indifferent manner.

“It’s true that the first expeditionary force’s departure was the trigger that led to the Colony’s destruction, but the ones who actually destroyed it were a portion of the cheaters, not the expeditionary force itself. It’s not fair to criticize you after the fact.”

“How rational of you...”

“I did say I don’t have a great opinion of all of you, though.”

There were some things I couldn’t accept on an emotional level. I couldn’t deny that. Still, it had been four months now. Whether this was *only* four months or *already* four months depended on the individual, but at the very least, I’d managed to calm my emotions. My desire to remain uninvolved with the exploration team far outweighed any complaints I had about them.

The worst part was this mysterious Heaven’s Voice who was part of their group. I had no idea how deeply the poison of malice had infected all of them. I prayed that the exploration team could purge the toxin as best they could, but if that failed, I didn’t want to get caught up in whatever would happen.

“You’re returning to the exploration team, right?” I asked.

“That’s the plan. I still feel a little stiff, but I can move around now. I need to pass by Serrata too before I meet back up with everyone.”

“Serrata... You plan on visiting Louis?”

“Mhm. Honestly, I still don’t think Louis was lying,” lino said, looking down as if to hide the strong glint in her eyes. “His righteous indignation was the real thing...I think. I need to speak with him once more, especially if he’s misunderstood something.”

The friction between lino and me during this incident had all originated from Louis Bard, the subordinate of the southern Empire’s most influential noble,

Margrave Maclaurin. He'd told lino, "Majima Takahiro is one of the people responsible for the attack on Fort Tilia." We didn't know whether Louis had tricked lino with his silver tongue or whether he had been under the wrong impression himself. lino thought it was the latter.

"I plan on leaving tomorrow morning," she said.

"Can't just sit still for a second, huh?"

"Well, yeah. There's also this Heaven's Voice. I want to get back as soon as possible. It'll take longer because I want to visit Serrata first too. It already took quite some time for my wounds to heal."

Currently, the only one among my travel companions who could use healing magic was Kei. As an elf, she had the makings of a terrific mage, but she was only ten years old and had a limited repertoire. Magic that just barely verged on grade 2 took time to treat any wounds. It had taken three days to get lino to a state where she could move around properly. Judging by her impatient personality, she was liable to dash off at any moment.

Despite this, she'd decided to spend the entire day helping us retrieve our belongings. It was a big difference from three days ago when she'd constantly yelled that she couldn't believe me. What on earth could've caused her stance to change so drastically?

"Don't worry. I'm not planning on dragging you back to the Empire after all this," she said, putting one hand to her waist and chuckling. "This Heaven's Voice or whatever they think they are might be part of the exploration team. You said you can't trust us. I guess that makes sense. Even Takaya ended up like that..."

lino sighed. This incident had given her a lot to think about now.

"Are you fine with leaving the whole Mizushima Miho thing like this?" I asked, looking at her sorrowful expression.

I figured this was an unnecessary question. There was no point in stirring things up. However, lino, who'd once been burning with righteous indignation regarding everything that had happened with Mizushima Miho, lightly shook her head.

“The person in question agrees with it, so it’s not my place to say anything,” she said.

Unexpectedly, it looked like she was dropping the point entirely. All the same, I didn’t really understand how she came to such a conclusion.

“The person in question?” I asked.

“Oh... Uhh, it’s nothing. Forget it.”

“It doesn’t sound like nothing...”

“A-Anyway! That’s how it is!” lino waved her hands about in a fluster and turned on her heel. “Okay then, I’m going to look for more!”

“Ah! Hey! lino!”

She was already running off by the time I tried to stop her. This was the Skanda. Even if she wasn’t in perfect condition, her figure vanished in the blink of an eye.

“What a weirdo,” I murmured to myself. Just then, I saw Katou staring in the direction lino had run off to. “Hm? Katou? Something wrong?”

“It’s nothing...” Katou said, shaking her head. “It can’t be...I think.” She giggled, then turned to her friend. “Rose, I’m done.”

“I have finished too,” Rose replied. “I’ll bring over the items lino just retrieved.”

Rose picked up the dirty items lino had brought back and carried them over to Gerbera and Kei, who were having fun chatting while splashing water around and washing things.

“It’s fine to have fun, you two,” Rose said to them, “but if you get too excited, it’s possible you might break something. Especially you, Gerbera. You can be quite careless.”

“I know, Rose. Don’t worry. I won’t make such a simple— Oops.”

“H-Huh? Gerbera? What was that? Did something just crack?” Kei asked.

“I *just* warned you...” Rose grumbled.

“I-I’m sorry!”

It looked like they were having fun. I watched them with a smile as I listened to the footsteps coming my way over the gravel.

“Um... Senpai?”

Katou came within reach, looking up at me with a probing gaze.

“What’s up?”

“Um, about lino... I thought you hated her.”

“I do. What about it?” I said a little dubiously. “What’s this all of a sudden?”

Katou looked somewhat vexed by my reaction.

“Despite that, um... How do I put it...?”

In the end, she couldn’t think of a polite way to put it and instead decided to give it to me straight.

“Senpai, it looks like you don’t actually *hate* her.”

I had trouble responding to the sudden accusation and hesitated for a moment.

“Does it look that way to you?” I asked.

“Yes.” Katou nodded, keeping her eyes fixed on mine the entire time.

“I see...”

I forced a smile without meaning to. It wasn’t that she’d said something completely off the mark. It was the opposite. Katou really did have a good eye when it came to people. I scratched my head and looked to where lino had run off.

“I’m not really lying or anything,” I said.

It was true. I swore to myself that I’d never lose what was precious to me; no matter what, that was one thing I would never allow to happen. Praying was the best my weak self could do. There was so much else I’d had to give up on to protect them. Just maybe, if I had the same strength as lino, I wouldn’t have had to give up on any of it. I couldn’t see her in a positive light because of that. Still, there was definitely something else aside from my negative opinions of her.

“When I see someone who has everything I’ve had to give up on, I can’t possibly think nothing of it,” I added.

“Senpai...”

“That’s why I hate her,” I said, pausing with a sigh. “It’s also why I want her to keep going. I want her to see things through like that to the end. Somewhere inside me, I truly want that for her.”

Before she’d chased me, Iino had saved several students in the Depths. She’d rescued people she didn’t really know, going as far as jumping into danger. She was sure to keep living like that too. In a sense, I couldn’t live the same way as she did, not now that I’d decided to prioritize protecting what was precious to me no matter what I had to do. That’s why I hated her, yet I couldn’t outright deny the value behind her way of doing things. Katou had sensed this inconsistency within me.

“What about you, Katou? What do you think of her?” I asked.

Katou narrowed her eyes, then said, “I...don’t like her.”

“I see. Well, that makes sense,” I replied with a chuckle. Her straightforward answer was rather like her.

“Senpai...” she muttered, looking up at me with an entranced gaze. Then she lowered her head as if running away from something. “It’s because you’re like that...”

This time, she was being uncharacteristically vague. She didn’t continue her sentence. She stood there with her hands clasped together. Because of our difference in height and the way she hung her head, I couldn’t see much of her face aside from her taut lips, but her ears had gone red.

An unexpectedly strange atmosphere wrapped around us, and we remained standing in front of each other in complete silence. I didn’t feel like she was criticizing me or anything. Katou’s behavior seemed...more like sulking. Maybe it was something a little different from that. I couldn’t really tell.

“What do you—”

“Takahiro, may I have a moment?”

Just as I tried asking for clarification, another voice called out to me. Kei came to a stop and looked up at me, and then at Katou.

“Oh, sorry. Did I maybe get in the way of something?”

“Not at all,” Katou said, suddenly raising her head. Relief colored her slightly blushed cheeks. “We were just chatting. Okay then, I’m going to go help Rose.”

Katou gave me a quick bow then left in a hurry. Kei saw her off, then looked up at me.

“Um, am I really not getting in the way?” she asked.

“Not at all.”

I still wondered what that was about, but chasing Katou and asking her for clarification would just disconcert her. Though I was dissatisfied with the result, I decided to move on.

“So? What did you need?” I asked Kei.

“Oh, right. It’s about the provisions we recovered,” she replied promptly. “We don’t have a lot of food on hand, so the plan is to prioritize cooking what we can retrieve. Are you fine with that?”

“Sounds good. Some of it’s probably spoiled, though. Throw out anything that looks bad.”

“Gerbera said it’d be a waste, so she’ll just eat them.”

“No, throw them out.”

I knew Gerbera’s stomach was tough, but I didn’t want to make a girl eat rotten food when we weren’t even in an emergency situation.

“Very well,” Kei said with a nod. Then she suddenly looked like she’d realized something. “Oh, one more thing. There’s something I’d like to talk to...or I guess, consult you about.”

“What is it?”

Kei looked around. After checking that nobody was listening to us, she looked back up at me. Anxiety highlighted her childish features.

“It’s about Shiran,” she said in a hushed tone.

Chapter 3: Consultation and the Result

The following day, Iino left, just as she'd said she would. Her plan was to return to the trade city Serrata in Lorenz County, press Margrave Maclaurin's subordinate Louis for answers, and then reunite with the exploration team, who were on their way to the capital.

We didn't have any reason to laze around ourselves. We resumed our journey in the opposite direction Iino had taken, toward Shiran and Kei's hometown in Aker. We were currently in the Kitrus Mountains, a precipitous mountain range that hugged one of the Aralia River's branches. The sky-piercing mountains drew a border between Lorenz County of the southern Empire and Cedrus of the Five Northern Kingdoms.

The mountains continued west and went on to divide Longue County from Aker. Up until now, we'd been proceeding northwest through the Kitrus Mountains in Cedrus. It was about time for the border to change.

If we were to continue going northwest, the mountains would come to an end and a branch of the Aralia River would take their place as the national border. The river split the two countries from each other, and I was told that one of the Dark Woods, a leftover scrap of Woodlands, spread out over that region.

In many cases, Dark Woods were left at large because powerful monsters resided within. They would be what we called rare monsters, queen monsters, or high monsters. In other words, they were viable targets to become my servants.

I definitely wanted to pay the Dark Woods a visit. Albeit, considering how I'd met Gerbera, there was a certain risk to encountering powerful monsters. It would be better to enter the Dark Woods after we'd settled down in Aker and had prepared ourselves sufficiently. Currently, our number one priority was reaching Aker.

Fortunately, our journey continued smoothly. We hadn't had any terrible weather, and there hadn't been any other accidents like the Skanda's attack.

It'd be a serious problem if things on that scale kept happening.

There was nobody I had any karma with—like I'd had with Takaya Jun—anymore, and now that Iino was no longer hostile toward me, we probably wouldn't have any more trouble from the exploration team. If there was anything still up in the air, it'd be the other monster tamer, Kudou Riku. According to the impression I got from him when we last met, he wasn't planning on baring his fangs at us yet.

In fact, the only things attacking us on the way were common monsters. Our encounter rate was fairly high, but this was simply because the mountain path was unused. That, combined with the path's proximity to the Woodlands, led to an increased monster population in the vicinity.

Gerbera was in high spirits taking care of all of them, so there wasn't a problem on this front at all. Seeing her so enthusiastic did make me wonder if she would slip up somehow, so I was a little on edge most of the time. But so far, she hadn't caused any landslides or the like.

We also had Shiran, who could search for enemies in the vicinity using her sprite, and Ayame, who had a sharp sense of smell. With them, there was no danger to our journey, so it was about time we started thinking about what to do next.



Early in the morning, after sword training, my sparring partner Rose left, and I was now alone with Shiran.

"You think we should split into two groups, leave the mountains, and go into town?" Shiran said. She was fully armored and looking at me with surprise.

"Now that we've gotten somewhat close to Aker, I think we should split up into two groups. Actually, we've got no other choice. I mean, we don't have a manamobile anymore."

"Oh, that's what you mean. Certainly, without a manamobile, we won't be able to keep Gerbera and Ayame out of view. It was one thing on the unused mountain paths, but it's a different matter once we get out on the main road, let alone near any villages."

“What’s more, Lily still needs time to recover. In any case, we need a group who can enter town and get us a new manamobile.”

“So that’s why you say we should split up.”

“It should be faster that way. Plus, we’ll be able to get supplies.”

Even though we’d retrieved some of the stuff that had washed away in the river, our provisions were in dire straits. We had been forced to regress to a nostalgic survival lifestyle.

Also, thanks to the aftereffects of battling the Mad Beast, Lily was still recovering, so her mimicry was rather limited right now. Her walking pace as a slime was extremely slow, so Gerbera was currently pulling her alongside our luggage in an impromptu cart Rose had made. This limited our speed as well, and we couldn’t use the main roads.

The plan was to split into two groups and have one go ahead to get a new manamobile. While those of us who could be seen in town did so, Lily’s group could take their time following in our wake.

“We have the funds the commander gave us, so we should be able to acquire a new manamobile,” Shiran said in a cautious tone. “However, it might be hard to find something of the same size and sturdiness. The manamobile we had was for military use. Also, Aker is far more rural than the Empire, so most vehicles are secondhand models from previous generations.”

“That’s fine. We don’t even really need the whole vehicle.”

“How so?”

“Come on. Rose has been analyzing the manamobile, remember? She’s gotten far enough in her research that so long as we have the runestone which makes it move, she can make the rest herself.”

“That’s...rather amazing.”

“She’s a little depressed she still can’t make one from scratch, though.”

After I’d tried comforting her, Rose had pulled herself together and declared she would make something that could match the speed of cars from my world. She’d also claimed she would make it unbreakable, even if Gerbera grabbed it

and swung it around. I found this part of Rose rather cute. It made me altogether forget to quip that a car wasn't a blunt-force weapon.

"I understand your intentions," Shiran said, sinking into thought for a bit before raising her head. "So, are you going to ask me to accompany you?"

"That's right. If we went on our own, we wouldn't be able to speak with anyone."

Talking with Shiran like this almost made me forget that this was another world. Without the translation runestone, we couldn't even converse with the locals. We were, in fact, taking lessons on how to use a translation runestone, but it was honestly difficult to say whether we'd make it in time before reaching a town.

"Besides, as a native of Aker, I figured you'd be able to help us acquire the runestone we need."

Customs differed between countries. This world was wholly unlike mine. Shiran's assistance as someone who knew the local customs would make it much less difficult to accomplish what we wanted to do. In fact, during our journey from the Empire, Shiran had taught us all manner of things, from how to get by at a travelers' rest stop to how to buy things in marketplaces. That was why I relied on her when it came to human society here.

"Can you do that for me?" I asked.

"I don't know if..."

However, Shiran didn't give me a favorable answer. A cloud fell over her expression as she averted her eyes. I honestly wasn't expecting her to refuse, so I was a little bewildered.

"Are you maybe opposed to going into town with us?" I asked.

"No, that's not the case, but..."

She apparently wasn't objecting. If she were, she was the type to convince me this was a bad idea without putting on any pretense. But in that case, I was even more confused. She wasn't opposed to my idea, so she had no reason to be so vague. Was there some kind of problem?

I continued staring at Shiran's pale face and naturally recalled what had happened a few days ago.



"Shiran is acting weird," Kei said. "I'm a little worried... So I wanted to come to you for advice!"

"H-Hang on a sec."

I placed my hands on Kei's small shoulders to hold her back as she closed in on me. Gerbera and the others looked our way from where they were washing our stuff, wondering what was going on. I waved them off, saying it was nothing, then turned back to face Kei.

"Calm down, Kei. First, you need to tell me the whole story."

"R-Right. Sorry. I got ahead of myself."

"So? Shiran is acting weird? In what way, specifically?"

"Specifically... It's a little hard to say." Kei's eyebrows drooped as she fumbled over her words. "How do I even put it? Umm... Somehow, lately, she's not acting like herself... Um, like, my sister is usually super reliable, right?"

"She is. You'd never think we're from the same generation."

"Right, that." Kei clenched her tiny fists in front of her and nodded repeatedly, then made a pensive expression. "Yet lately, she's zoning out all the time. It's like she's always distracted or something, like she's always deep in thought."

In the middle of speaking, Kei's shoulders slumped despondently. She really was worried about Shiran. Seeing her so down, I gave it some thought. There were a few things I could think of that would make Shiran act strange.

Shiran had died at Fort Tilia. She'd surpassed death and returned as a demilich. She'd lost the company of knights she was affiliated with. I'd seen her push herself too hard all the time, especially right after the commander's arrest and our subsequent escape from Serrata. I'd also noticed Shiran was acting differently, in a way that could become dangerous, and had been keeping an eye on her.

However, I didn't feel anything of the sort from Shiran now. She'd calmed down by the time we reached the Kitrus Mountains. In fact, by that time, she'd left the fighting to Gerbera, since by then we didn't have to worry about being seen by others.

She'd managed to recover from the mental shock of all that had happened. Shiran was strong, and not just physically; her heart was also strong. The pride she'd cultivated as a knight now supported her. The fact that she'd opposed the violence at Fort Tilia without faltering, despite turning into an undead monster, wasn't just for show. That said, I couldn't just ignore it now that Kei had come to me for advice. Perhaps there was something else I hadn't thought of yet.

"Takahiro," Kei said, bringing me back from my thoughts. "Can you do something about my sister?" She looked up at me with pleading eyes, trembling. "She doesn't want to show me her shortcomings... If I ask her, she'll just dodge the question. But if you ask her, I feel like it'll work out, one way or another..."

"Got it." There was no way I could refuse her request. I put the slightest amount of strength into my grip on her shoulders. "So don't look so sad."

"Takahiro..."

Kei had come to me because she trusted me. I had to live up to that. Besides, if she was right, I shared her worries about Shiran.

"I'll look for an opportunity to speak with her about it," I said.



Maybe my recent conversation with Kei was influencing me, but something really did seem off about Shiran's behavior. It was probably a good idea to probe a bit.

"Hey Shiran. Has something been troubling you?" I asked.

She turned back to face me, her beautiful and unblemished elven features half-hidden by an eyepatch. All I could see was the bloodless left side of her face. A single emotionless blue eye stared back at me, highlighting her nearly translucent skin. After a short moment, she relaxed her expression and cocked her head.

“Did Kei say something?” she asked.

“Well...”

“I thought so,” she said with a sigh before bowing to me. “I must apologize for that girl inconveniencing you.”

I’d messed up. There was no point in her apologizing to me. Regardless, I had to say what was on my mind.

“Please don’t blame Kei. She’s just worried about you.”

“I don’t plan to...” Shiran started, but stopped halfway. “No. I suppose you have a point. I should be reflecting on how I caused her to worry to begin with.”

She shook her head as if she were exhausted.

“Shiran...?”

“I supposed I would have to mention this sooner than later. This may be a good opportunity.” Shiran’s attitude changed completely. She looked at me with her usual sharp gaze. “Actually, my body has felt a little off lately,” she said in a dignified tone.

“What...?” My head went totally blank for an instant. “A little off? Are you okay?”

I didn’t understand and unintentionally took a step closer to her.

In contrast, Shiran was fully composed. “Yes. There’s no need for concern. It’s nothing serious. It’s just that, with a body like this, everything is poorly balanced. I can still fight, but my strength has deteriorated in some ways.”

Shiran paused and formed a fist before continuing.

“I didn’t say anything because there’s a possibility everything will return to normal. I figured I would wait it out and see for a little while. I couldn’t possibly let everyone worry about me unnecessarily, so I had kept quiet to see how things would turn out... I’m very sorry.”

“So that’s what it was,” I said, then suddenly realized something. “Is that maybe why you haven’t been taking the front in battle lately?”

“Yes. Having said that, I should still be able to fight on the same level as Rose.

Nevertheless, I was worried about how it would turn out after a series of battles, so I decided it would be safer to stay in the back unless I was needed.”

During the chaos at Fort Tilia, Juumonji Tatsuya had stabbed Shiran through the chest. Then she’d turned into an undead monster. Several inconveniences accompanied that transformation. For example, after she lost her sense of reason and turned into a ghoul, she hadn’t been able to use the spirits right away when she regained her heart. It made perfect sense that her combat potential had fallen due to the instabilities of her body.

As a matter of fact, from the very beginning, I’d been worried about some kind of unexpected change to Shiran’s body. The reason I never noticed until now was because she hadn’t shown any signs of it.

Conversely, even if it was a bit of a problem in combat, it was trivial enough that it didn’t hamper her daily life. I knew she wasn’t the type to lie and cause everyone trouble when it was really important, so she’d probably accurately estimated that she could fight at the same level as Rose. She had no reason to lie about her condition in the first place.

The inconvenience she was speaking of wasn’t urgent, so I was relieved for a moment. I had to pay more attention to her now, of course, but it was at least fortunate that we didn’t have to figure something out right away.

“Thanks for telling me, Shiran. I get the gist of it,” I said, letting out a small sigh of relief. “But if you notice some kind of change, let me know. I don’t care how trivial it is. Kudou and I are the only ones who have powers related to monsters. I might be of use to you.”

“Thank you very much.” Shiran lowered her head deeply. “By the way, Takahiro, what shall we do about heading into town? Just as I mentioned, my combat potential has deteriorated. If only Kei and I were to accompany you, I believe there would be concerns regarding our combat strength.”

“Hm...? Oh, that.”

Her lackluster response to my proposal had been because she was worried about our safety. Now that I understood, I corrected her.

“It’ll be fine. There’s no need to worry about that.”

“Meaning?”

“You two aren’t the only ones coming with me. I’m considering asking Rose and Katou to come too. Also, I plan on asking Berta to escort us partway there.”

Incidentally, even after we’d chased off Takaya Jun, Berta still guarded us. When Gerbera had fully recovered, Berta had gone back to Kudou. She’d said she would return, and it was about time for her to get here, which was why I’d decided we should be getting ready to split into two groups. If I could get her to give Katou a ride, our pace would improve substantially. I didn’t know whether she would agree to this, but judging by the impression she gave us so far, I expected she would do so if asked.

“In that case, it should be fine,” Shiran said.

Now that she knew we would have company, she looked relieved.

“So...”

“Yes,” Shiran replied with an understanding smile. “I will accompany you into town.”

Chapter 4: The Puppet's Feelings *Rose's POV*

"Okay, it's about time I get going," Lily said in the middle of cooking. I was working with my knife in hand like usual. "Sorry Kei, could you watch the fire for me?"

"Sure."

Today's breakfast was leftovers from yesterday's dinner—soup with monster meat Berta had gotten for us when she'd returned. Lily had prepared some edible wild herbs and used them to garnish the soup, so she left the rest to Kei, who was just waking up with a cute yawn. Lily looked to be in a great mood.

"Are you going to see our master, Sister?" I asked.

"Hm? Yup, that's the plan."

With a towel and bucket in hand, she came over to where I was sitting. But instead of footsteps, I heard something slithering across the ground. My sister's lower body was still that of a slime. Her upper body did, in fact, have the voluptuous curves of a woman, but she couldn't shape out the minute details. She was still recovering from surpassing her limit during the battle against the Mad Beast.

"His morning training should be done about now," she said. "I was thinking of taking him a towel at least."

"Our master has been training even more lately. Please tend to him as best you can."

"Of course. Oh, I know. Do you two want to come too?"

"I have work to do," I replied.

That was partly an excuse. I didn't want to get in the way of their time together.

"I'll also refrain," Mana said with a bittersweet smile. She was in the middle of learning how to use a translation runestone. "It's not even breakfast yet. I'll

overload on sugar if I go,” she added jokingly, brushing Ayame all the while.

“Kuuu...”

Ayame had been a little more docile lately. She was curled up in Mana’s lap, her ears folded down, quietly letting Mana brush her over and over.

“Mrgh. You know you don’t have to be so considerate of me, right?” Lily said, then she suddenly looked up. “Oh, it’s Gerbera.”

Our master’s training partner for the morning, Gerbera, was coming our way.

“Is their morning practice over?” Lily asked.

“It seems so,” I answered.

“Okay. Then, I’m off,” she said, turning around.

Her lower body slithered across the ground as she turned at the waist and gave me a smile. It was a gentle smile, as if the warm feelings deep inside her chest were oozing out. Her figure captivated me. Mysteriously enough, despite the state of her body, her womanly charm seemed more potent than before.

“Lily’s changed, huh?” Mana muttered, probably feeling the same sensation I had.

“She has...”

Before this, my sister had never really liked her true nature as a slime. However, even though she couldn’t hide her slime body right now, there wasn’t a single shadow hanging over her face. The sight of her nestling up against our master was the very embodiment of sweet happiness. Her mental state had definitely changed somehow.

Perhaps influenced by that change, Lily had been behaving differently than before. One such example was that she could be close to our master without caring about her slime figure. She also proactively used her recovery time to learn this world’s language. She wanted to read local books. Also, up until now, only my master had spoken to other visitors. But before lino Yuna left, my sister had conversed with her on multiple occasions. I’d caught sight of them talking a few times myself. I didn’t know what had caused this change within her, but seeing her so happy, I was certain it was a good thing.

“Now then...”

After seeing my sister off, I returned to my work and took my magic knife in hand. Currently, I was working on various parts for a manamobile. They had decided that I would go to town with my master. If we could acquire the necessary runestone, I'd make us a manamobile. That was why I'd decided beforehand to make parts that would be easy to carry.

I was about halfway through analyzing the mechanics of a manamobile. As a result, I'd figured out that there were several secondary runestones installed in various locations of the vehicle. The vehicle's size, as well as the magnitude and direction of the driving force used to push the frame, determined what size runestone was needed, so I could simply make them to match what we ended up with. I was having a hard time analyzing the main runestone, which served as the driving force behind the vehicle, but everything else I could already duplicate with imitation runestones.

A few days after the Skanda lino Yuna parted ways with us, I'd heard I was going into town with my master. My work had progressed since then, so even though the parts I'd made were small, there were quite a number of them. More specifically, even accounting for spares, there was enough for four vehicles.

Maybe I made too many... They were getting heavy too, so maybe it would be good to start working on something aside from manamobile parts. For example, we had an item that was more practical than anything else we carried—the magic bag. It had an increased capacity, so even though it looked small on the outside, it could hold several times its size. As such, it made sense to make one for everyone.

The bag I used for all my tools was getting rather large, so something small enough to hang off my waist would be rather convenient. I would need time to fine-tune the runestone, but it seemed worthwhile to try some things out through trial and error.

As I was thinking of how to do this, Gerbera walked toward me. She came to a stop a short distance away from the campfire and folded her legs to take a seat. I started working out the size and design of a magic bag for my tools while I

discussed it with Mana. Not long after, I started to hear quiet groaning. The voice was getting louder and louder. I stopped my work and looked up. Gerbera was holding her head in her hands, moaning over what appeared to be a difficult problem.

“Is something wrong, Gerbera?” Mana asked.

“Hrm?” Gerbera raised her face, her eyes wide. “Ooh. I didn’t see you there, Katou.”

“I’ve been here all along...” Mana said in astonishment.

“Is that so? Sorry about that. I didn’t notice.” Gerbera paused and cocked her head. “So? What is it?”

“What...? I’m the one asking you. You don’t usually come back right after Senpai finishes training. Besides, you’ve been groaning about something all this time.” Mana gave her a worried look, then asked, “Is something troubling you?”

“Hmmm. Yes. Actually, there is,” Gerbera said, a little hesitantly at first, but she honestly admitted it. She nodded at us gravely, and her brow wrinkled. “A few days ago, I made a promise with my lord to have a tryst.”

“Should you be telling me this?”

Mana had been prepared to give advice, but now her eyes were half-closed in exasperation.

“Um, Katou, wait a moment. Don’t jump to conclusions.”

“So you say...”

“I’d like your advice.”

Gerbera sounded seriously troubled. Still, I understood Mana’s desire to roll her eyes.

“It’s uncomfortable to hear all about your dirty endeavors, though,” Mana said.

“Be at ease. I’ve yet to embark on any such endeavors. I couldn’t tell you about them even if I wanted to.”

“Now that you mention it, you have a point. You’ve only ‘promised’ so far,

huh?” Mana muttered, putting a finger to her lip.

Gerbera nodded happily. “Yes, that’s right. My lord told me we would flirt when we had time alone.”

“Huh. That’s a little unexpected. Did Majima-senpai put it that way?”

“Hm? No. Maybe I’m the one who said that.”

“So he didn’t tell you that at all...”

“Th-That may be so, but he hugged me! He also said he was sorry to keep me waiting!”

“Hmm. Senpai said that...” Mana turned my way for a moment. “So he’s finally thinking that way. That’s a good thing.”

“Indeed. So next, he’s going to take some time for me.”

“Haah... Is that so? Congratulations. But I’m full to the brim already. Are you going to keep bragging? Honestly, all this sugar is going to give me a cavity.” With that, Mana smiled wryly, though her gaze was gentle. “All that’s left is for you two to move things forward, right? If you’re finding it hard to get some time alone with him, I’ll lend you a hand.”

I knew very well that Mana was good at looking after others.

“Hrmm. If possible, I’d like to do just that. There is one little problem, though,” Gerbera said.

“A problem?” Mana asked.

Mana’s tone had been kind, but it wasn’t to encourage Gerbera to confess so honestly. Gerbera did so anyway.

“Indeed. It seems that when I get aroused, I can no longer regulate my strength. I’m liable to crush my lord flat in my embrace by accident. What do you think I should do?”

Mana stared back at Gerbera, squinted at her, then turned my way. The words “She’s a lost cause” were written all over her face.

“Rose, it seems we must absolutely keep Senpai from being alone with Gerbera.”

“Katou?!” Gerbera’s eyes shot open in despair.

Seeing Gerbera’s shoulders droop, I decided to join the conversation.

“Mana was just joking. It’ll be fine as long as you avoid doing anything yourself, right?”

“Hm? What do you mean?” Gerbera asked.

“If you don’t embrace him, you won’t be able to crush him.”

It was just a makeshift solution, but it was better than nothing. More importantly, our master’s life depended on this.

“I-I see. In other words... I must become a bottom!” Gerbera yelled cheerfully.

“That’s probably it,” I said with a vague nod as I watched her clench her fists. “I don’t really get it, though.”

“I don’t either,” Gerbera agreed. “Isn’t it like how our lord used to be?”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s fine, right? It’s all in the past. Lately, our lord has been rather assertive.”

“Is that so?”

“Hang on, Gerbera,” Mana suddenly cut in. “How do you even know that?”

“I have good eyes and ears. Once in a while, I see and hear all sorts of things. Such as this and that with Lily... I’d think you knew that, Katou. Have you not come across such a scene yourself lately?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha—?! I-I wasn’t staring or anything! So I have no idea whether Senpai is assertive!”

“Oh. Right. Now that I think of it, you immediately left after you saw them.”

“H-How do you know that?!”

“Like I said, I have good eyes and ears.”

Now that I thought of it, Mana had gone to relieve herself one night, and she’d come back flushed all over. She’d said that she couldn’t sleep, and I’d lent her my lap. She’d been strangely needy that evening, which was rather cute in my opinion. Apparently, this had been the reason for her behavior.

“Anyway, that makes sense. Playing the bottom may be an option,” Gerbera said, ignoring the now bright-red Mana and shooting up to her feet. “Very well! I’m going to be a bottom now!”

“I feel like your prospects just dwindled from shouting that so vigorously...” Mana quipped, looking exhausted.

“Perhaps, but this is the only way I know how to conduct myself,” Gerbera replied, then turned to Mana with a serious look. “Say, Katou. I don’t plan on stopping my march forward, you know?”

I had no idea what those words implied, but Mana returned Gerbera’s weighty gaze.

“How about you, Katou?” Gerbera continued. “How long do you plan on remaining a train wreck?”

“I...”

“Well, I do understand that you have your own pace,” Gerbera said with a sudden smile, removing all the tension in the air. “There’s no sense in forcing the matter. But just so you know, I also want to cheer you on.”

“Gerbera...”

“After all, you’re my comrade in wanting to ravish my lord!”

“D-Didn’t I tell you last time that you’re wrong?!”

Mana was once again crimson.

“Oh, yes, you did. That means you want him to pounce on you instead?”

“Where did you get an idea like that?! You’re wrong! I told you to watch your vocabulary last time too!”

“Oh, sorry. Umm... Then you’d like to share an embrace, lock lips, and touch and be touched by him, right?”

“Why are you being so specific! Oh, crap...”

It was strange to see Gerbera driving Mana into a corner like this. Just then, Mana suddenly realized something and turned my way, still flushed all over.

“That’s the first I’ve heard of this,” I said with a cock of my head. “Mana, do

you wish for my master to pounce on you?”

She let out a soundless scream. Her mouth flapped open and closed like some sort of fish out of water. This went on for a few seconds before she swiveled her head back toward Gerbera.

“Gerbera...?”

“Y-Yes?! D-Did I say something I shouldn’t have?”

Gerbera broke into a cold sweat before Mana’s teary-eyed glare. Her past trauma was still alive and well to this day, it seemed.

“Well, that aside...” Gerbera mumbled, turning her red eyes my way as if to escape from Mana. *“Rose, you speak like this has nothing to do with you.”*

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

“It’s simple. You also share the same feelings that we do, I think.”

“What feelings?”

She wasn’t making sense at all. Gerbera also seemed to realize this, and she looked at me with doubtful eyes.

“Rose, I’ve heard that you want our lord to hug you. To help that happen, you’ve been redesigning yourself as a cute doll.”

“Yes.”

“So, you obviously desire what comes after that, don’t you?”

“No.”

My tone must have conveyed my utter confusion, because Gerbera looked like she didn’t believe me. Not that I had any idea why that was.

“Oh my. So...what? You really don’t desire what comes after that?” she asked.

“I’ve never even thought about it. If our master wishes it, then I obviously intend on complying no matter what it is.” I thought it over for a while, then said, *“But isn’t that impossible?”*

“Wait just a moment, Rose,” Gerbera said as she pinched her brow. Then she turned to Mana. *“Say, Katou... What’s going on here? It looks to me like Rose is*

serious.”

“I’ve been trying my best to help, despite this result,” Mana replied.

“I see. So that’s how it is...”

Gerbera turned back my way with a troubled look.

“Rose? I do think dearly of you as my elder sister. So allow me to say this. Aren’t you lacking...desire?”

“That’s not true. Our master’s affection belongs only to Lily, after all.”

I wanted to experience that night I’d spent in my master’s arms once more. I wanted to return to that dreamlike encounter. I was fully aware that this simple wish was the height of insolence. So wishing for more? Honestly, that would be like the sky falling. One could say my conviction was unshakeable.

“But, Rose,” Gerbera continued, “you say it’s impossible, but our lord now desires such a thing from me too, you know?”

In that instant, my thoughts slammed to a complete stop.



Gerbera’s words had prodded at thoughts I’d never even considered before. It was just as she’d said; the situation had changed. My master had decided to accept Gerbera’s feelings. The sky had already fallen. There was no such thing as the impossible.

If so... If so...then...what? What does that even mean? Useless thoughts began spinning around in my head. Our conversation had come to an end, but everything was still hazy to me. Actually, Kei had been listening to us talk the entire time while she watched the fire, and because our conversation had been too stimulating, she’d ended up fainting and we’d been forced to stop.

Breakfast was now over, and we were in the middle of cleaning up and preparing to depart. I was gathering our luggage, but things were moving at a sluggish pace. I was well aware that I’d been shaken to the core, but I didn’t understand why I was so shaken. Well, that was a bit of a lie. I had a faint idea. In other words, just like Lily and Gerbera, perhaps I also desired for our master to love me.

Did I truly wish for such an outrageous thing? I didn't know. The very concept had never even crossed my mind. That was why I'd never given it thought before, and I couldn't imagine it now that it was on my mind.

However, it was true that I was restless just thinking about whether I wished for "that." Within this bloodless body of mine, there was an emotion akin to a smoldering fire. It had always been there. It was what had driven me to want my master to hug me. I hadn't been aware of it, but I finally grasped this sensation. *What do I truly desire?* I wondered to myself.

"Rose."

Before I knew it, Mana was standing right in front of me. She was already dressed for travel. I then noticed that my hands had come to a complete stop.

"S-Sorry, Mana. Have I kept everyone waiting?"

"Not at all. We still have time. I was in a bit of a rush to get ready, is all."

"I-Is that so?" I felt relieved to hear that, but then I realized that something had stuck out to me. "You were in a rush?"

"Yup. There was something I wanted to talk with you about," Mana replied with a nod, then cut to the chase. "It's about Majima-senpai."

I jolted. I couldn't hide my unrest at the sudden mention of my master's name. If Mana had noticed my discomposure, she pretended not to see and continued.

"We're accompanying Senpai into the next town, right?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"I think this is a good opportunity," she said with a faint smile. "Rose, would you like to use this chance to go on a date with him?"

Chapter 5: What's Needed to Enter Town

I stood atop a small cliff by myself. This spot, sporadically surrounded by trees, was wide enough for me to move around. I could faintly hear my companions preparing dinner beneath me.

“Okay,” I muttered, holding up my left arm. “Asarina, reinforce me.”

“Massss—ter!”

Asarina cried out with her creaky voice and wrapped around my left arm, which was still covered in the burn scars I'd gotten from a blowfox attack in the past. Once her viny body was fully entwined around my arm, I picked up the shield I'd left on the ground.

“Good. It feels really light. Looks like a success.”

“Ssster! Ter!”

Asarina had acquired this ability during the battle against the Mad Beast. She could now function as a reinforcing exoskeleton. We'd managed to replicate it here perfectly. At the time, I needed Gerbera's mana to use it, but now I could do it without it. That mana granted me explosive power, but it exhausted me considerably, so it was much more practical not to use it. We'd tested this several times to get used to the sensation, and in this moment, Asarina had perfectly mastered it.

I tried grabbing my sword with my left hand and swinging it around. In the fight against the Mad Beast, all I'd needed to do was withstand its blow, so I had only enhanced my physical strength. I had no idea whether the exoskeleton hampered my movements. From the looks of it, it didn't seem to be a problem. As I swung my sword about, I could feel the vines tightening around my arm, but my movements were actually smoother and more precise than before.

Asarina sensed my will and matched my movements. Because her roots were digging through my body, our connection through the mental path was deeper than my connection with any of my other servants. I'd wanted to take

advantage of this, so we'd been practicing passing instructions through the mental path for use in battle. We'd accomplished this feat because of that training.

"Looks like we can use this in an actual fight. Also...right. We could make it easier for you by... Hm?"

"Sster?"

Both Asarina and I came to a stop. I took a look around. Shortly after, I spotted a spider with the upper body of a girl walking my way.

"My Lord."

It was Gerbera, her face drawn tight in an extremely serious expression. Her bloodred eyes glanced at Asarina.

"I have something I'd like to speak with you about. Is now a bad time?" she asked.

"Hm? Oh, not really. Asarina, let's call it a day."

"Sster!"

Asarina unwound her body and withdrew inside me out of consideration.

"So? What is it?" I asked.

"Mm. I've come to fulfill our promise," Gerbera declared nervously.

I wasn't so dense that I didn't know what she meant. This was definitely regarding our promise to spend some time alone when we could. A part of me had wondered when we would get to this. Still, it was embarrassing to hear it like this.

"I see."

In the end, I could only squeeze out a brief acknowledgment.

"S-So, about that... I have a request," Gerbera continued, her nearly transparent skin dyed red. She was talking considerably faster than normal.

"Recently, I nearly crushed you to death in my embrace, remember?"

"Yeah."

“Even now, I don’t have the confidence to stop myself from doing so in the middle of the act.”

“Huh?”

I raised an eyebrow. This boded ill.

“Well, just listen,” Gerbera said, noticing my bewilderment and holding her palm out. “It seems I’m unable to restrain my strength when I’m aroused. I believe you know this already. Therefore, I shan’t do a thing.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Exactly. If I imprudently attempt to embrace you, I am liable to make you go *splat* in the process. Thus, I shall become a bottom.”

“*Splat...*”

It wasn’t really a sound effect you’d hear during the act. In any case, she was actually making sense here.

“Well, I understand what you’re getting at,” I said.

“Very well. Now then, come at me as you will!”

Gerbera vigorously puffed out her chest. The topic being what it was, the lively and supple bounce of her breasts drew my eyes. I usually tried not to pay it too much attention, but Gerbera’s outfit was really risqué. Her breasts were about the same size as Lily’s, and her constantly visible cleavage was honestly poison for my eyes. The willowy curves that her belly and back drew made her more womanly than anyone else I knew. The spider half that connected below that, from the white hair to its form, was also beautiful. It inspired awe in any who saw her. In no way did it detract from her beauty.

Her usual childish behavior that offset her sensuality had now vanished behind her flushed cheeks and fidgety movements. She closed her eyes, defenseless as she presented herself, her suspiciously beautiful face before me.

“Okay...”

I stepped closer and placed my hands on her shoulders. Her skin felt silky and soft underneath my palm.

“Mmm...”

Gerbera’s eyebrow twitched, and her legs lightly scratched at the ground. She bit down on her lip. The sight of her holding it in fanned at something which lay dormant deep inside me. I slowly wrapped my arms around her back and brought myself closer, her womanly scent spreading over me.

Her ragged breathing, spurred by her nervousness and arousal, brushed against my skin. I could feel her trembling slightly in my arms. My eyes naturally closed as I slowly brought my lips closer...when I heard a thunderous sound.

“Huh?”

Gerbera had shaken off my arms and leaped through the air. She’d gotten several meters away from me in an instant, her legs dragging ruts into the ground.

“G-Gerbera?”

The shock of rejection had me frozen in place.

“My Lord...” Gerbera said, raising her tearstained face. “I-I can’t do this after all!”

“Huh?”

“If your lips had kept going and touched mine, I feel like, like...it’d be completely useless!”

I didn’t really understand, but it didn’t seem like she was rejecting me. I felt slightly relieved as Gerbera continued to tremble.

“A kiss is such a dangerous thing...” she murmured. “Both my body and heart felt like they were going to melt. There’s no way I could have possibly maintained any sense.”

Her legs skittered about. This was a tic of hers when she was holding back.

“I obviously can’t continue being a bottom like that!”

“I’m not sure what you mean...”

“Does everyone surpass such a difficult hurdle?” she muttered in astonishment.

She was probably wrong about that to some extent...

As she continued to rack her brain, I let out a small sigh.



“What’s going on, Master? I heard a scream.”

Lily had come over after she’d heard the commotion. She still couldn’t use her mimicry properly, so she slithered across the ground toward me. She looked at me with her slimy face, then tilted her entire body to the side.

“Huh? Where’s Gerbera? Wasn’t she with you?”

“She said, ‘It’s useless for me now! But I shan’t give up!’ and then ran away somewhere.”

“Aah... Operation Bottom failed, I see.”

Her features were still somewhat vague, but I could clearly see her wry smile.

“You knew about this?” I asked.

“Mhm. It was Rose’s idea. I thought it was a pretty good one myself.”

“She also said, ‘I’ll remember this!’ I mean, why even tell me that?”

“Aha ha...”

“Everything would be fine if I could just withstand her strength. I feel a little sorry for her.”

“Hmm, I wonder about that. It goes both ways, doesn’t it?” Lily said, understanding what I was getting at while I scratched my head. “We’re a different species from you, Master. There will be obstacles to surmount. It’s definitely difficult, but I don’t think Gerbera will lose heart over this. That’s one of her charming points, right? I’m sure you love that part of her too.”

Lily paused, peeking at my expression and giggling.

“What’s with that face, Master? Are you still worried about that? I already told you it doesn’t bother me, whatever happens between you two.”

“I know that, but...”

“Well, it’s a matter of sensibilities and feelings, so I can understand you

getting caught up on it by instinct.” Lily drew closer and rested her head on my chest. “Just being able to do this is more than enough for me.”

“Lily...”

“If you’re going to spend time worrying about that stuff, I’d be happier if you spent it with me. I mean, we won’t be able to see each other for a while.”

Lily smoothly slipped past the line Gerbera hadn’t been able to cross.

“Mmm.”

She pressed her girly yet monstrous body against mine, then met my lips with hers. She wasn’t wearing any clothes, so the sensation of her pressing against me was very vivid. She was acting clingy because she felt lonely about having to part ways for a bit. Stimulated by the swelling love in my heart, I put my hand to her cheek.

We shared a deep kiss, and our silhouettes became one, melting into each other. Lily had overcome the obstacles holding her back. The distance between us was minuscule.

The next day, we split from Lily’s group and headed down the mountain.



“The number of towns in Aker that house more than a thousand people can be counted on a single hand,” Shiran said, sitting on her soles.

She was in her traveling clothes, and she’d laid out a simplistic map in front of her that showed where the main roads and towns were. The map we’d gotten from the Alliance Knights had washed away in the river during the Skanda’s attack, so Shiran had drawn this one from scratch. I’d jotted down the names of each landmark in katakana on it.

“According to what we were told before we entered the Kitrus Mountains, this route comes out near the town of Zaquo. Meaning...”

Shiran traced her finger along the map.

“We are probably somewhere around here. The closest major town is Diospyro. It’s the largest town in eastern Aker and the center of distribution for goods to the surrounding villages and towns, so I believe it will be an acceptable

destination for our purposes.”

“How much time will it take us to reach Diospyro?”

“Let’s see... I think we should get there in three days. According to Berta, there is a settlement nearby. We can ask for details there.”

It had taken us three days to descend the mountain, so considering the time we would need to acquire supplies in town, a round trip would take us somewhere around two weeks. This largely matched our preexisting schedule.

“Second King.”

Perhaps reacting to her own name, Berta, who’d been lying on the ground near us, joined our conversation. She raised both of her enormous wolf heads.

“There are human eyes to be wary of from this point onward. This is as far as I will go.”

“Oh, right. Thanks, Berta.”

“I’ve said this many times already, but I’m doing nothing more than following my king’s command,” she said, averting both of her intelligent pairs of eyes. “I’ve been ordered to protect you for a while. That is the only reason I am accompanying you. Hence, I don’t need your thanks. I’m not your damn companion or anything of the like.”

She was being awfully cold. Her demeanor was the same as usual, but something about it struck me as odd this time. Ever since she’d returned to Kudou and come back, Berta had been behaving strangely. I wondered if something had happened.

Because she’d helped us get Lily back, I couldn’t dislike this enormous wolf. I didn’t forget that she’d once tricked Sakagami Gouta and eaten him, but Kudou had made her do that. When I’d pressed her for answers as to whether she’d tricked Sakagami, I’d seen guilt in her eyes.

Now that I had the opportunity to interact with her more, I saw that she was actually pretty good at looking after others, despite her curt attitude. Fundamentally, she had a good heart. I didn’t know whether this was a good thing for her as one of Kudou’s servants, though.

“We should reach the settlement in the afternoon. I’ll guard you until then,” Berta said in a low voice. “After that, I’ll return to the slime and spider. After seven days, I’ll come back here and wait for you. Is that all?”

“Yeah. Thanks. You’re a big help.”

“I keep telling you...”

Berta started to say something, but she fell quiet. She’d realized it was useless to continuously tell me not to thank her. Watching her wave her tail and tentacles about sulkily brought a smile to my face.

“Okay, that’s it for our plans until we reach the village,” I said, turning back to face the two elves sitting in front of me. “After that, we’ll be relying on you two a whole lot. We might end up being a bother, but we’ll be in your care.”

“Understood.”

“Leave it to us!”

“All that’s left is... Hmm, Katou and Rose sure are taking their time.”

After figuring out our plans, I took a look around the area. I couldn’t see the two of them anywhere.

“They excused themselves after we finished breakfast. Should I go look for them?” Shiran proposed with a cock of her head.

“No, it’s fine.”

I could tell through the mental path that they hadn’t gone far. They were sure to return before we departed, so there was no need to go out of our way to look for them. And just as I was thinking that, footsteps came toward us with perfect timing.

“I’ve returned, Master,” Rose said.

I turned around casually. “Aah, welcome ba—”

My greeting got stuck in my throat. My mouth popped open as I stared at the person before me. She was an unfamiliar girl. Her dark silver hair swayed behind her in a braid. She was tall for a woman, and she was wearing a dark blue dress with a collar.

The skirt of the dress gracefully draped over her legs, and judging by the thick fabric it was made of, it was both practical and beautiful. Furthermore, she wore a large apron, which made her expression look more composed than cute. She wore long gloves that covered both of her arms, and her socks went all the way up to her thighs. Her outfit exposed very little of her skin.

The only part of her body that really stood out was her abnormally beautiful and angelic face. Her features were so delicate that they almost looked like wrought glass. I'd never seen anything like it before.



She looked entirely different, but I immediately knew who she was.

“Rose...?”

“Y-Yes.”

Rose smiled awkwardly, perhaps from the tension of the moment. My heart thumped loudly as I watched her do her best to shape her lips. This had completely thrown me off, and it made me act even more flustered.

Just then, Katou peeked out from behind Rose and said, “Come on, don’t just stand there.”

Those words made me realize that we were standing stock-still facing each other, as if we were at some kind of marriage interview.

Seeing me like that, Katou smiled in satisfaction and pushed Rose’s back. Rose walked my way, but her movements were jerky and stiff. Katou had probably pushed her like this all the way here.

Once Rose got close to me, she plopped down to take a seat, like a switch had been flipped inside her.

“Wow! You look amazing! It suits you so well, Rose!” Kei yelled with a look of wonder. “This is the outfit you prepared so that you can go into town, right?!”

With Kei’s words, I finally understood the situation. Rose had apparently prepared these clothes so that she could go into town. I’d thought it would be bad if she walked around with her mask on and joints exposed, so when I’d asked Rose and Katou to accompany me into town, I’d also asked whether something could be done about Rose’s appearance. They had simply told me that they would make preparations on their own. I’d trusted them to work something out and left them to it, but I never thought they would put in this much effort. It had definitely taken them a lot of time to prepare this, and now was its grand unveiling.

“It suits you, Rose,” Shiran said.

“It really does. She’s so pretty,” Kei added in agreement. Her eyes were sparkling in admiration as she turned my way. “Right, Takahiro?”

“Y-Yeah.” I finally realized I’d yet to say anything myself. “She’s right. I-I think

it suits you.”

The most boring of phrases came from my mouth. It irked me that I hadn't praised her in a better fashion. I couldn't really express my bewilderment in the first place.

“You're so pretty that it shocked me.” That was the best I could do.

In the next instant, all expression vanished from Rose's face. She now looked like an inorganic doll. The change was so sudden that it startled me. *Did I say something wrong? Or did I not praise her enough?* Many thoughts raced through my mind.

Speaking in hindsight, all of my guesses had been way off the mark. I was later informed that Rose wasn't very good at making facial expressions. Since her face had originally been featureless, this made perfect sense. She'd put in a lot of work to make herself appear less inhuman. But even now, some of that awkwardness remained. Whenever her attention was directed elsewhere, all such features would vanish entirely, leaving a cold expression that no human could make.

That was exactly what had happened now. I didn't find it unsightly, though. Maybe I was a little biased, but Rose's features were so delicate that her inhuman and cold expression suited her quite well. She was like an angel.

Still totally expressionless, the ethereal Rose...collapsed backward with a thud.

“Uhhh...”

Why had Rose lost her expression to begin with? In short, the moment she'd heard my childish praise, she had lost her presence of mind.

“R-Rose?!” Katou shrieked.

Shiran and Kei got up in a fluster. One of Berta's heads yawned, and she closed her eyes as if this had nothing to do with her.

We had to wait some time before Rose recovered from “fainting,” to borrow a human term, so that we could depart.

Chapter 6: The Villages of Aker

We arrived at the village at the foot of the mountain early in the afternoon. In this world, where monster attacks were a constant threat, it was typical to see defensive walls and a moat around such settlements. The reclamation villages on the paths cutting into the Woodlands had walls of stone, but other villages used thick logs tied together with straw ropes. Even though we'd gone from the Empire to Aker, this hadn't changed. The modest wooden houses were a little shabbier, but at a glance, they looked to be built in the same way. The reaction we got from the people living here was entirely different, however.

"Oooh, I recognize that armor. Are you one of the Alliance Knights?!"

An old man with a well-worn sword at his hip greeted us. The moment he saw Shiran, he rushed over with a huge smile.

"Yes. I would like a room at an inn for the night," Shiran replied.

"I see. Unfortunately, there are no inns in a village as rustic as ours. If you'd like, I could offer you my house."

"You will? I would be most grateful."

"Think nothing of it. I never thought an Alliance Knight would visit our village. Are you on some sort of mission?"

"Yes, well, something like that. I apologize for surprising you with our sudden visit."

"There's no need for that. It's an honor to have you."

They weren't receiving us as simple travelers; they were welcoming us with open arms. I could see other villagers checking us out a little farther away and could even hear them calling their friends over to watch. This kind of reaction wouldn't have happened in the Empire.

"The Alliance Knights are famous in Aker," Kei told me, seeing how confused I was. "The title of knight is considered prestigious, even beyond our borders."

This is especially true in the Five Northern Kingdoms, where they have a strong militaristic spirit. Knights are extremely popular among the people. The Royal Army and the Order of National Defense protect the country at the command of the royal family, but the Alliance Knights, who defend humanity at Fort Tilia, are recognized on an entirely different level.”

It wasn’t all that strange that knights who ventured into the Woodlands to exterminate monsters would be a symbol that commanded respect. Also, in this country, it didn’t appear to be a problem that Shiran was an elf. The commander was a princess here; it pretty much stood to reason. Even now, Shiran continued to have a lively conversation with the old man.

“By the way, I’ve been wondering all this time...” the old man said. “Are you perchance Lady Shiran?”

“How could you tell?” Shiran asked.

“Ooh, so you really are. I thought so, considering how young of an elf you are. Rumors of you have even spread to these remote lands.”

It turned out it wasn’t just the Alliance Knights who enjoyed fame. Shiran was popular all on her own. This made perfect sense. Shiran was a lieutenant among the already-prestigious Alliance Knights, and she was even known as the strongest knight in the northern Woodlands.

Nonetheless, it seemed Shiran was unaware of her popularity. Ever since she started at Fort Tilia and began accruing fame, she’d never once returned to her home country, so this was probably the first time she was experiencing this treatment.

Shiran turned around and gave me a troubled look. With that, the man speaking with her finally noticed our presence.

“Lady Shiran, who are they?” he asked.

“They are of blessed blood. I am currently escorting them.”

“Oh my! I am terribly sorry for my behavior!”

The man’s complexion changed entirely. People of blessed blood were descendants of visitors. In other words, they were descendants of legendary

heroes. Visitors often socialized with the upper echelons of society, taking spouses among the noble class. As a result, many of blessed blood were also nobles.

There had been those among the visitors who had Asian features, so Katou and I pretended to be of blessed blood during our journey. We figured it would be less troublesome than telling people we were actually visitors. Plus, we had one other reason to lie like this.

“B-But our village doesn’t have anywhere luxurious enough for those of blessed blood to stay...” the man said.

“There’s no need to worry about that,” I replied. “So long as there’s a roof, I’m not going to complain about any old shack you have lying around.”

“Th-That won’t do! Th-Then, allow me to guide you. P-Please follow me.”

At the man’s invitation, we entered the village. There was a slight tension in the air. After taking a few steps, I turned around to look behind me. Rose walked gracefully at the end of our line, her braided hair swinging behind her. She was pretending to be an attendant to me and Katou. It was normal for people of high standing to have someone to look after them. It wasn’t suspicious for a person of blessed blood to have an attendant around. Shiran had assured us of that, at least.

Furthermore, though Gerbera had made her clothes, Katou, Shiran, and Kei had helped with the design. Shiran had supervised the whole thing, so not only did they hide the majority of Rose’s body, but they also matched the clothing of this world so as to avoid standing out.

Nevertheless, I couldn’t help but feel a little nervous now that we were giving it a try. But since none of the villagers seemed to suspect that Rose was a monster, I finally relaxed.

“It looks like Rose will be okay,” Katou whispered to me.

“Yeah. Seems we don’t need to worry,” I whispered back.

We continued walking, looking at the fields spreading to our sides, when we noticed one of the major differences between this village in Aker and the ones we’d seen in the Empire. The security around the perimeter was armed with

spears and bows and wore leather armor, just like the security in the Empire. However, all of the villagers here, male or female, including the elderly, were armed with shortswords. Even the villagers working the fields had full sets of weapons and armor at the ready under canvas tarpaulins next to their workplaces.

Rather than looking like armed villagers, they looked more like soldiers doing fieldwork. Taking into account the village's small size and the lack of reclamation in the area, monster encounters would be numerous out here. What's more, they were likely always short on hands when it came to battle. Still, there didn't seem to be much difference between livelihood and combat. It was as if their lives and battle stood back to back.

"Hey Kei, this is considered a normal village in Aker, right?" I asked.

"Yup. What about it?"

"The air feels strangely heavy."

"Oh, you might feel that way when you see it for the first time," Kei said in a cheerful yet triumphant tone. "In Aker, even the farmers are all fighters. It is said that a savior with close relations to Aker passed down this way of life several centuries ago."

"It's different from the Empire, huh? It's like they're ready for monsters to attack at any moment. Even the children and elderly."

"It would be difficult for the children or the elderly to defeat a monster, but if they can damage a monster's shoulder or something in exchange for their life, it would reduce the danger to everyone else that much more."

Kei had spoken like it wasn't a big deal, but that was quite the fearsome explanation. She'd mentioned before that Aker had a militaristic spirit, but I only understood the extent of it now.

As we continued talking, we arrived at a bungalow a little larger than the other houses in the area. After we exchanged greetings with his family, the man guided us to our rooms.

"I will come and get you when dinner is ready," he said to me. When I handed him payment for the lodgings, he nervously added, "We have spare rooms, so

please use this one with your wife. Lady Shiran and her sister can use that one over there.” Then he left in a hurry.

Those of blessed blood were descendants of saviors, visitors who were revered with religious fervor, and they were often nobles as well. The man’s overawed behavior made me smile bitterly, but something far stranger than any of that stuck out to me.

“My...wife?”

What was he talking about? One beat later, we all turned around at once and met Katou’s eyes.

“Oh.”

She also realized the man’s misunderstanding around the same time. Her face turned red in the blink of an eye. But his mistake wasn’t surprising. I was the only man in this group. Shiran and her sister Kei had been assigned a separate room. Excluding Rose, who was dressed like an attendant, there was only one person left.

“Uhh... Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be...”

Katou covered her scarlet face and fidgeted with her pigtails. A restless air enveloped us.

“Let’s talk inside for the time being,” Shiran proposed out of consideration.

I was very grateful for her intervention. We all entered the room together.

“Anyway, looks like you’re pretty famous, Shiran,” I said, taking the initiative to change the subject and ward off this strange atmosphere. “I’m a little surprised.”

“So am I, Takahiro,” Shiran replied, taking a seat on a bed next to Kei and forcing a smile. “This country is my home, so I know how highly they regard the Alliance Knights, but I see there are things you don’t understand until it concerns you directly.”

“I guess you also really admired knights when you were a child then?”

“Yes, well, pretty much all the children born in Aker come to admire knights at least once in their lives.” There was a nostalgic look in her eye now. “In my case, though, my admiration was a little more specific. My elder brother served as a lieutenant in the Alliance Knights, so I swore to myself that I would also become a knight one day.”

A shadow then suddenly fell over Shiran’s expression.

“I feel a little bad for tricking that man, though, when he was so delighted by an Alliance Knight’s visit. I kept quiet because it does us no good to thoughtlessly spread it about, but now that the commander is under arrest, for all intents and purposes, our company is dissolved. I’m not even sure whether I can call myself a knight now. That man doesn’t know...”

“Shiran...”

“Sorry. That was unnecessary,” Shiran said, shaking her head and pulling herself back together. She turned her blue eye to me, her gaze honest. “More importantly, Takahiro, our plans were to gather supplies and collect information on the vicinity, correct?”

“Yeah. We need to confirm that this is close to Diospyro.”

“In that case, we don’t have much time. Let’s finish our discussions with the locals before the day is over.”

Shiran got up with confidence. The anxiety that had hung over her just moments ago was gone.

“Hey, Shiran,” I called to her just before she left the room. “Even if your company has been dissolved, even if you’re no longer a knight, it doesn’t mean you’ve lost what you wanted to accomplish by being one, okay?”

“Takahiro?” Shiran came to a stop and turned around in the doorway.

“I don’t think you tricked that man.”

She looked surprised. After a short while, she gave me the slightest smile.

“Thank you very much.”

With that, Shiran left the room and I followed her out. Just as I entered the hallway, someone grabbed my hand. I looked down to see Kei smiling up at me.

I returned her smile, then gave chase after Shiran.

Chapter 7: An Unexpected Encounter

It took us three days of passing through villages to reach our destination. Diospyro was a town with a population of around two thousand, so it wasn't all that large in the grand scheme of things. Nonetheless, it was a vital commerce center in Aker, so its defenses were relatively heavy, and its walls were made of stone.

The Royal Army had a permanent defensive force stationed here, so I saw many soldiers wearing matching gear. Whenever there was any trouble in the neighboring villages, they would be dispatched to send aid.

The road we'd used to get here continued through the town as its main thoroughfare. Most of the buildings lining each side of the street were two stories. The trade city Serrata, which we'd visited in the Empire, had originally been a fortress, but it had grown as people flocked to it for safety. Diospyro, on the other hand, had started as a travelers' rest stop along the road and had grown into a settlement. This road dividing the town in two stretched beyond its walls all the way to Evernasia, Aker's capital. The reclamation village Shiran called home was also in that direction.

In any case, our goal here was to acquire the runestone we needed to make a manamobile move. I wanted to get this done as quickly as possible and return to the others.

"First, we should find the inn," Shiran said.

Gazes from all over gathered on her. I couldn't even count how many times I'd admired how popular the Alliance Knights were in Aker. If we were to dawdle and let people approach us, we would end up getting stuck here. Instead, Shiran walked briskly and led us through the streets. We quickly found the signboard for the inn that one of the villages we'd passed through had referred us to.

"Looks like this is it."

We followed Shiran through the doors. There was a reception desk to the front and a restaurant to the left, where several customers were having a meal. A plump middle-aged man, who appeared to be the innkeeper, sat at the reception desk. A boy stood across the desk from him. He was tall with black hair and eyes.

“Hrm?”

Hearing the door open, the boy casually turned around, but when he saw us, he raised his voice in suspicion. He glared at us harshly.

This was the very definition of a bolt from the blue. My feet came to a complete stop. I didn't freeze up in fear from his glare or anything. Though he was wearing clothing from this world, this boy definitely didn't look like a local.

The unexpected encounter made every muscle in my body stiffen. Still, I couldn't be sure yet. I endured the urge to let my agitation show. Considering how I was here pretending to be of blessed blood despite being a genuine visitor, it was possible someone of blessed blood could also look like a visitor.

“The hell's a visitor aside from me doing all the goddamn way out here?”

Well, the boy's curt muttering brought an end to it. He really was a visitor. We also had the exact same question in mind. Why would there be a visitor here aside from us?

There was a strong glint in the boy's eyes. It wasn't friendly by any standard. Seeing this, Shiran stood ready for battle, though she didn't draw her weapon. Behind us, Rose entered with Katou, and after she confirmed the situation over my shoulder, she also stood on guard. Our stare down went on for several seconds.

“Sir...?” the innkeeper said in bewilderment.

The boy quickly averted his eyes. “It's nothin'. Extend my stay. Pay in advance, yeah?”

He picked out some coins from a leather satchel and dropped them on the reception desk. Then he pretended he didn't see us and headed for the staircase.

“It’s got nothin’ to do with me.”

I heard him mumbling as he climbed the stairs. We hadn’t even had time to say anything to him, and we had no reason to call after him either. I looked up at the staircase, feeling like it had just rained on us.

After confirming that the boy was gone, Rose whispered in a tense voice, “Master, was that really...?”

With that, I finally let out the breath I’d been holding.

“Yeah. Looks like it.”

He was a visitor. Judging by the heavy presence of mana that had oozed out of him for just a single instant, he was probably a cheater. We had to be careful around him.

“Not that he seemed to have any interest in us.”

He’d had a sour look, but I hadn’t gotten the impression that he was being actively hostile. It was more like that was just his normal behavior. Also, from the way he’d acted, I could tell that he wanted to stay out of anything troublesome. If so, he wasn’t all that different from me in that respect.

“What shall we do, Takahiro?” Shiran asked.

“Hmmm...”

Iino had told me that the exploration team back in Fort Ebenus were heading to the imperial capital. So why was there a cheater aside from me in Aker? I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t curious. Yet digging too deep into his circumstances would be much like prodding a snake in a bush.

“If we both decide to keep out of each other’s business, then it’ll be fine to ignore him,” I concluded.

I also didn’t want to get involved with any visitors if I could help it. So long as he didn’t mean us any harm, there was no need for us to act.

“Very well,” Shiran agreed. “In that case, shall we go ahead and arrange for our lodgings here?”

“Yeah, let’s.”

I addressed the innkeeper, who seemed quite curious about our group. As usual, he misunderstood my relationship with Katou, but we got our rooms sorted out smoothly. While we were doing so, the boy came back down the staircase, gave us one short glance, and then left the inn. It really did look like he wanted nothing to do with us.

We did try asking the innkeeper, just to be sure, and found out that the boy was also lying about being of blessed blood. He was staying with someone else too, but his travel companion wasn't of blessed blood—meaning they weren't a visitor.

If he was an exploration team member, he wouldn't need to hide his identity. According to Iino, a few people had withdrawn from the group, so it was possible he was one of them. If that was the case, then it was a little odd he'd reached Aker before us. Unfortunately, it didn't look like we would find out any more about him. I stopped thinking about the situation and got to doing what needed to be done.

Once our rooms were booked, I left the inn with Shiran and headed toward the Royal Army's headquarters in this town. Apparently, one of Shiran's former fellow knights worked there. Alliance Knights who had to retire from their posts and return home were often invited to be instructors for the army. Their experience fighting in the world's most dangerous region was invaluable. Also, they recommended promising-looking soldiers for knighthood. One such knight worked in Diospyro, so Shiran had proposed that we start by asking him about acquiring a manamobile.

The facility we arrived at was a solid building made of stone. Buildings like this were used as shelters during emergencies.

"Ooh, Shiran. Long time no see."

The young man smiled broadly when he saw Shiran, then introduced himself as Adolf. He was fairly short, but his body was still well trained. He was missing his left arm, however. This was the reason he'd had to quit being a knight.

After our introductions were done, he guided us to another room farther inside the building.

"I see, so the company is done for..."

Since he was a former member of the Alliance Knights, Shiran told him what had really happened at Fort Tilia. She kept her transformation into an undead monster and my inherent ability a secret, but she told him everything about the major casualties the company had suffered and about the commander's arrest at the hands of Margrave Maclaurin. Once she finished, Adolf put his hand to his brow, a grave expression on his face. This concerned the comrades he'd entrusted his life to in battle. All of this, including the commander's arrest, was sure to grieve his heart.

"Thank you for telling me, Shiran," he said after a short while. Having pulled himself back together, he gave me a smile out of consideration. "I understand the situation. If it's for the man who protected the knights of the company...and an esteemed savior at that, I'll provide any assistance I can."

"Thank you, Adolf," Shiran said.

"Think nothing of it. I'm sure you went through a lot. Obviously, I would help," Adolf replied with a shake of the head. "You're looking far paler than before. It must've been hard."

"Well..." Shiran muttered, a vague smile crossing her bloodless demilich face.

"Leave the runestone to me. I'll try going through the army's connections. With my authority, it'd be a little hard to prepare a military-use manamobile, but if all you need is the runestone, I should be able to work something out."

"That would be great. It's a large burden off my mind."

"Unfortunately, I'm a little busy right now and can't get things moving right away. Can you wait a few days?"

"Of course... Did something happen?"

"Actually, the neighboring villages have reported several monster sightings. Well, that's pretty common around here, but one of the reports is a bit worrisome. We've decided to send out a scouting party, and I need to pick who's going on the mission."

"Worrisome how?" Shiran asked firmly.

Perhaps out of habit from his days working as an Alliance Knight, Adolf

answered immediately, though his voice was bitter.

“A dragon.”

“Is this for certain, Adolf...?” Shiran’s expression sharpened considerably.

The first thing I thought of was the monster that had attacked us immediately after we arrived in this world. The image of a student flailing his arms and blowing off the dragon’s head in an instant left quite the impression, but that was because a cheater’s power was so abnormal. It wouldn’t normally go like that.

Dragons were generally very powerful monsters. They could cover great distances with their enormous wings, so on rare occasions, they would leave the Woodlands and wreak havoc on human society.

“If it truly is a dragon, shouldn’t you be requesting reinforcements from the Order of Nation Defense?” Shiran asked.

“Yes, but the dragon was spotted quite far from here by a resident in a remote village. No harm has been done yet, and if there’s a nest, it’ll likely be deep in the forest a good distance away. In that case, it’ll be hard for us to pinpoint its location. The witness sighted it from afar to begin with, so it’s still unknown whether it truly is a dragon.”

“But this information cannot be ignored.”

“Exactly. That’s why we’re sending a scouting party,” Adolf said with a grave nod. “I don’t think I need to mention this, but please be careful when you leave town. I don’t want to lose any more of my comrades.”



Adolf promised he would speak with one of the merchants the army dealt with the next day. If he could get us a runestone, it wouldn’t be until at least the day after that. We’d discussed a somewhat-troubling topic at the end, but there wasn’t really anything we could do about it. That meant our schedule for tomorrow was open the whole day.

“Since we have the time, wouldn’t it be best to spend it relaxing and getting some rest?” Shiran suggested once we got back to the inn.

“If it’s fine with you, I was hoping to get some training in,” I replied.

“That is very much like you, Takahiro, but you do need to rest once in a while, you know?”

“She’s right, Senpai,” Katou said, joining in, then she shot a glance over to Rose and clapped her hands. “Oh, how about we all take a look around town tomorrow?”

“M-Mana...?”

Rose sounded a little shaken, but Katou didn’t pay her any mind and continued.

“It’s fine once in a while, right? I mean, we’ve been aiming straight for our destination all this time, so we haven’t really had the chance to take our time and look around.”

“So you want to go sightseeing?” I asked.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Shiran said with a smile. “I need to go see Adolf tomorrow, but the rest of you should take it easy and take a tour of town.”

I thought it over a bit. Honestly, it had never even occurred to me. It wasn’t a bad idea, though. There wasn’t really anything we could do tomorrow, anyway. In that case, maybe it was fine to look around this town in Shiran’s home country for a change of pace.

“Got it. We’ll do just that,” I said.

“Thank you very much,” Katou replied, looking tremendously pleased.

Chapter 8: The Puppet's First Date *Rose's POV*

We were planning to take a walk around Diospyro the next day, but on that morning, we ran into a slight problem.

"Sorry, Senpai. It was my idea, yet I ended up like this..."

After she woke up, Mana had complained about feeling unwell.

"I'm just feeling a little off, so please don't worry about me too much."

Just as she said, her complexion wasn't all that bad. It was probably just exhaustion from our continuous journey.

Mana sat up in bed, smiling sadly. "There's no point in me going out and making it worse. So instead..."

"Sure. It's unfortunate, but we'll cancel our plans," my master said.

"You can't!" Mana yelled in a panic.

In light of her poor condition, she'd sounded rather spirited just then. My master stared back at her curiously as she let out a small cough, her cheeks slightly flushed.

"I'd feel bad about ruining everyone's plans just as you were about to get going. Don't worry about me. Please have a look around town."

"Huh...? But I..."

My master looked puzzled, but Mana didn't give him time to speak.

"There's no need to worry. I asked Kei to stay with me in case anything happens."

"Yes! Leave it to me!" Kei yelled cheerfully, thrusting her hand in the air.

Mana had been with me the entire morning...so when had she found the time to ask Kei to do this? I'd never even noticed. Mana really was on top of things, as always. It was like she'd known it would come to this from the very beginning. In any case, Kei was good at caring for others. I could feel confident

leaving this to her.

Once I'd thought things through to this point, I suddenly cocked my head. Mana was in poor health. Kei was going to take care of her. Shiran had other plans. Meaning...

Mana smiled as if reading my thoughts. "Senpai, Rose, please enjoy your day."



Mana convinced my master to go to town and asked him to wait for me on the first floor. I was rather perplexed by some details, but first I had to check on Mana's condition.

"Mana, is your health truly not worsening?" I asked.

Her eyes widened, and she exchanged glances with Kei, the only other person left in the room.

"Huh? Rose? You didn't notice?" Mana asked in return.

"Notice what?"

"We talked about you going on a date with Senpai, didn't we?"

"What about it?"

We certainly had discussed that, but according to yesterday's plans, we were all to see the town together. If not for this coincidence, I wouldn't have been able to go alone with my master.

"No, I mean, I planned on doing this from the very beginning," Mana said. "That's why Kei helped lay the groundwork too."

"Huh?"

"You really haven't noticed. That *is* just like you, though," she said with a giggle. "Well, it's not a total lie. I am a little tired from all the traveling. I don't have any stamina, so it's best for me to rest when I can."

"In that case, couldn't you have proposed that my master and I walk around town on our own to start with?"

"If I had done that, I figured you'd refrain out of consideration. We knew beforehand that Senpai wanted to train whenever he had the time. So we had

no choice but to spring a surprise attack on you two like this.”

Mana really did understand me well. She saw I had nothing to counter her with at this point, so she turned to Kei.

“Sorry for having you stay with me, Kei.”

“There’s no need to apologize!” Kei said, shaking her head vigorously. “I’m also cheering Rose on! But...are you okay with this yourself, Mana?”

“Okay with what?”

“It was finally a chance for you to go out and play with Takahiro.”

“Oh, that. It’s fine like this,” Mana replied, smiling gently at the innocent girl and shaking her head. “Time spent like this is a necessity for Rose.”

“Mana...”

She certainly had a point. There was much I was ignorant of. I’d wanted my master to hug me, but the initial impulse wasn’t enough anymore. When I learned that what lay beyond a hug was now possible, I’d been shaken to my core.

But what *did* lay beyond that? My master was the most important thing in the world to me. What kind of relationship did I want with him? There was no way I could find the answer in just one or two days. But a whole day spent in his company like this could be one step toward discovering that answer.

That was what Mana was saying. And I wanted to meet her considerate expectations. Mana’s goal was to get my master to want to hug me, to be more conscious of me, even if just a little. Therefore, this date had to succeed.

“Huh...? What am I supposed to do on this *date* thing, anyway?” I asked, noticing an enormous flaw in the plan.

“Relax, I’ve thought it all through,” Mana replied with a tender smile.

Her expression was genuinely kind... However, on this day, I learned that kindness didn’t necessarily involve leniency.



A short while later...

“Y-You want me to do *what*?!” I exclaimed. “M-Mana. W-Wait a minute. That’s impossible for me.”

“Come on, you better hurry. Senpai is waiting downstairs.”

Mana got out of bed and pushed me into the hallway.

“Mana...”

“Give it your best.”

She began to shut the door behind me. I could see her reserved smile. It truly suited her. It was modest, but also relentless. There wasn’t a hint of mercy behind it. What was the expression they used in my master’s world to describe this? A lion throwing its cub off a cliff?

The door closed with a clack of finality. I stood stock still and dazed in the empty hallway for several seconds. I lowered my eyes to my palm, where I held a translation runestone. I’d learned to use it for occasions like this.

Only the timing of this opportunity had caught me off guard. Everything I needed was already prepared. Above all else, I couldn’t keep my master waiting. Thus, I hardened my resolve and walked toward the staircase.



“I-I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

After I descended the staircase, I found my master and Shiran waiting for me. The two of them were evidently killing time by talking until I got here.

“Oh? Ready to go, Rose?” my master asked with a troubled smile.

Was he in some way displeased about having to go out alone with me? I was a little worried now.

“Very well, Takahiro. I will excuse myself here,” Shiran said.

“Sorry for keeping you.”

“Think nothing of it. Be careful, you two.”

Now that I’d arrived, Shiran left the inn. She was planning to head straight to that military facility they had visited yesterday. Now I was alone with my master.

“U-Um, Mathter.”

I bit my tongue right off the bat. Well, to be precise, I didn’t have any vocal organs, so it was more like I lost control of myself, but it was something similar. I was far too conscious of what was going on.

I calmed the tension within me and corrected myself. “Master. Forgive me. Is it a bother to go into town with me?”

“Hm? Oh. Not at all. It’s a little different from what we planned, so I’m slightly confused, is all... Come to think of it, why are you apologizing?” he said, then smiled awkwardly. “Shall we?”

“Yes,” I replied with a quick nod.



The town called Diospyro was the distribution hub for goods in eastern Aker. Shops lined the main street, and many people were walking about. I followed my master through the crowds, one step behind him.

“Are you listening, Rose?”

I spontaneously recalled what Mana had told me.

“Majima-senpai doesn’t recognize this as a date. First, you need to get him to be aware of you, even if just a bit. To do that—”

I tightly clenched my hand, now covered by a long white glove. It was about time. I slowly reached out.

“All right then, Rose,” my master said, suddenly turning around.

I quickly lowered my hand.

“Wh-What is it?” I replied.

“Huh? I haven’t had breakfast yet, so I was thinking of finding somewhere to eat...”

Right then, he stiffened. It was as if he’d just realized something bad.

“Is there a problem, Master?”

“I wouldn’t really call it a problem...” he answered with an awkward look. “I

was thinking of just picking some random restaurant, but you can't eat, right?"

"I cannot."

My body didn't have the function to process food. I'd considered it, but there were other things to prioritize first, so I'd decided to leave it for later.

"There is no need to mind me," I said. "I can wait until you finish eating."

"Going into a restaurant together and having you wait on me is a little..."

"Is it not allowed?"

Now that I thought of it, Mana had told me that it was essential we do things together for this date thing to work. But my master and I couldn't share a meal. Did that mean...I'd stumbled right out of the gate?

Oh no... I'd only just realized that I couldn't take part in a so-called lunch date. One activity option was out the window before we even got started. This was a major disadvantage, right? Was I a defective dating partner? The impact of that possibility left me shocked. What misfortune. What was I to do? Was this what "wanting to cry" felt like? Not that I could produce tears in the first place.

"There's no rule against doing that at a restaurant or anything," my master said, prompting my sense of time to move again. "I was just thinking it'd be boring for you. Anyways, I'll get something I can eat on the go. According to Shiran, there's a bunch of stalls that serve food like that a block off the main street. Let's head that way."

"Very well."

My master turned off the main street, and I quickly followed behind him. Clearly, I'd been jumping to the wrong conclusion. Pessimistic thoughts filled my head. That wouldn't do. Although, my master was partially at fault for that one.

I mean, nothing I could do with him could possibly be boring. He didn't quite understand that, though. Nevertheless, his concern for me made me feel like I was floating on a cloud. It was such a simple thing, yet before I knew it, that feeling of wanting to cry had vanished completely.

We passed through a narrow alley and came out onto a smaller street. There

were lines and lines of stalls packed tightly together. Each one was selling a variety of goods. There were twisted potatoes piled up like mountains, vegetables of every color, meat lathered in juicy sauces, secondhand clothes, worn-out weapons and armor... It was all a little dizzying.

“Okay, I’ll just be a sec.”

“Oh, Master. Please wait a moment.”

I stopped him just as he was about to go buy something from a random stall.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Could you allow me to go for you?”

“I don’t really mind, but why do you want to?” he asked, his eyes wide.

“I’d like to try using this money thing.”

My master furrowed his brows.

“Can I not?” I asked.

“No, you can,” he said, pulling out a coin purse from his pocket. “Actually, that’s a pretty good idea. Considering what’s to come, it’s better you gain these experiences. Well, I say that, but I’m not all that used to handling the money here myself... Anyways, I’ll leave it to you this time.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll be just a minute.”

He handed me the purse, and I headed toward a stall, feeling his gaze on my back. I stood at the back of a long line of people. It was my first time experiencing a queue. I glanced behind me as I waited and met my master’s eyes. He looked a little restless. Contrary to what he wanted others to think, he had a tendency to be rather overprotective.

He was definitely ready to help me if I ran into any difficulties, but that would be a little pathetic of me. Fortunately, I’d already studied the value of currency, so I managed to finish my first attempt at buying something without any problems. I jogged back to my master’s side.

“Here you go, Master.”

“Thanks.”

I handed the coin purse back along with the steamed meat bun I'd bought. He smiled, and I did my best to return it, though my expression was still awkward. We continued walking as my master ate.

"Does it taste good?" I asked.

"The texture is a little peculiar, so I'm not really used to it, but it isn't bad. After that survival lifestyle, pretty much everything tastes good."

The bun wasn't all that big, so over the course of our conversation, it became much smaller in no time at all.

"Steamed buns usually aren't made with bread. They use hardened meat inside a rice-based... Well, I guess you don't get what I'm saying, huh?"

"I've seen this dough before in your meal last night at the inn. There wasn't any meat inside it, however."

"Apparently, they mainly use potatoes here. According to Shiran, they're Aker's staple food. If we're going to settle down here, I guess I'll have to learn how to cook them."

"Even if you do not, I believe Lily and Mana will be proactive in learning. Rather, they may tell you not to steal their jobs."

"You've got a point there. I'm no match for them when it comes to cooking, so maybe it's safest to leave it to them..."

My master fell silent for a few seconds, deep in thought.

"Settling down in Aker, huh...?" he muttered. "What'll you do, Rose?"

"What do you mean?"

"Want to try opening a shop of some kind?" he said, looking over to a stall with many metal utensils hanging on display. "It might be a little rough since magic tools made of wood will be somewhat conspicuous...but with your skills and a little studying, I'm sure you can get around it to a certain extent. In that case, you could consider doing something like that."

I didn't respond right away. I'd never thought of it before. So, instead of answering, I asked a question of my own.

“What do you plan on doing, Master?”

“Hmmm... I haven’t really given it much consideration,” he said, slowing his pace and focusing on his thoughts. “Even though I can wield a sword a little better now, I only learned for the sake of self-defense. It’d be nice if I could make a living by just cultivating a field or something...”

Though he desired a life too simple to be a dream for the future, his voice had a prayerlike ring to it. So long as we servants accompanied him, it was uncertain whether he could have a stable livelihood anywhere in this world. We’d come to the commander’s country, but the possibilities here were only a little better than elsewhere. We had no guarantees. Perhaps all the chaotic incidents involving visitors were drifting through my master’s mind. Or maybe he couldn’t throw that all away. Though he lacked the abnormal strength of many of the other visitors, his way of life was firm and unshakable. That was exactly why I believed that I had to protect him.

“When that time comes...” I started to say, speaking before I’d even realized it. “When that time comes, please allow me to help with the fieldwork.”

My master turned to me with a bewildered look, then broke into a smile. “Yeah... Maybe that could work.”

We both knew that such a future might not come to be. Nevertheless, we ignored the difficulties and hardships that stood in our way and just considered the possibilities. Surely it was necessary to pass time like this every once in a while.

I returned my master’s smile with an awkward curve of my lips. Even among the noisy crowd, it felt like there was an air of tranquility wrapped around us.

“Umm... Master?” I said. Right now, I felt I could do it. “May I borrow your hand?”

“Hm? What for?”

My master came to a stop and looked at me curiously, but he still held out his right hand immediately.

“Excuse me,” I said, grasping his hand.

“A handshake?”

“I did it wrong.”

What was the point in gripping it with my right hand? This was a mess. I had to calm down. I continued to persuade myself to follow through as I let go of his hand, then took hold of his arm.

“H-Hey,” my master stuttered, his voice slightly cracking.

I had no composure left to answer him. I nestled up against him, imitating what my elder sister always did, though my movements were extremely stiff and awkward. This was the assignment Mana had charged me with. I was overcome with a sense of accomplishment.

“Rose...?”

This wasn't my final goal, however.

“A-A-A-A-A...” I stuttered.

“Ah?”

“A-Are you...displeased?”

“No. Not at all. But why all of a sudden?”

“I'm your guard today. I must do the same as my sister always does.”

Maybe I was forcing things a little, but when I recalled Gerbera's attitude, I decided to weather this trial with vigor.

“Shall we?” I said.

My master didn't shake me off. As I started walking, he matched my pace. We were once more a part of the moving crowds. Things had somehow managed to go as planned. Having said that, I didn't know what to do next. When she'd sent me off, Mana had told me that my master didn't recognize this as a date. Linking arms like this was one way to make him realize that it was.

I was definitely uneasy, though. I looked human, but my body was still only that of a puppet. Pretty much every part of me was hard and cold. It was painfully obvious to anyone who touched me.

Was he conscious of me as a puppet, or as a member of the opposite sex? Did

this have the opposite effect from what I'd intended? I glanced at my master's face. His cheeks looked...a little red, perhaps. Was it a success? I couldn't really tell.

"Hey, Rose?" my master said, a hint of bewilderment in his voice.

"Wh-What is it? A-Am I too hard? Does it hurt?"

I glanced down at my own chest. Because of the female body's shape, when linking arms with someone, the two swelling protrusions of the chest pressed against the other person. I'd made my body using Mana as reference, so I didn't have the notable curves that Lily or Gerbera had. Still, Mana's build wasn't seedy either. Consequently, I had average-sized breasts. I supposed it would be painful to have two hard objects pressed against one's arm. I'd tried to account for that before adjusting any of my limbs. I'd judged it would be okay to press them against my master like this...but maybe I hadn't gone far enough with my work?

"Forgive me," I said. "I thought I'd prepared them so that they wouldn't cause any pain."

"No, it doesn't hurt. Nothing's hard. In fact, it's soft..."

"Really? Thank goodness. I asked Mana for help in this regard."

"Katou's...help?"

"Yes," I replied energetically.

This was my joint project with Mana. My gallant friend had done so much for me and our group's sake. She simply didn't like to claim anything as her own achievement, so this was a precious opportunity for me to inform my master of her great efforts. Even without such pretext, I found it genuinely fun to talk about my friend.

"I didn't know what kind of feeling or shape human female breasts had," I continued in a lively tone. "I needed to see, touch, and carefully research them."

"See, touch..."

My master came to a stop.

“Is something the matter?” I asked curiously.

“No... It’s just...I’m a guy, you know?”

What did gender have to do with any of this? My master hung his head low and used his free left hand to give himself a few hard knocks on the brow. It looked like he was trying to drive idle thoughts from his mind, but I wasn’t sure if that was the case. I just didn’t understand the subtleties between men and women.

Regardless of my lack of understanding, I still gave it some thought. Mana had once emphasized to me that women had to be soft. It appeared to me that, as a man, my master hadn’t been satisfied.

“Forgive me, Master. I thought I’d made a perfect replica. Does something feel wrong about them?”

“That’s not the problem. There’s nothing wrong. Wait...a replica?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“I don’t think I can look Katou in the face when we get back...”

What did that mean? I was still confused about a lot, but I didn’t get the opportunity to ask for clarification. My master murmured in a daze and raised his head, then his expression suddenly turned grim. The atmosphere around us changed immediately. I also tensed up.

“Oh?”

Contrary to our reaction, the voice we heard sounded light and carefree. An unfamiliar young man was looking our way. Next to him was the visitor we’d met in the inn the other day, looking awfully displeased with something.

Chapter 9: The Puppet's Future *Rose's POV*

The young man walking our way with the visitor had a gentle demeanor. His soft light-brown hair and kind features complemented his mild mannerisms. However, his slender body was that of a fighter. I could see his tempered muscles beneath the single layer of clothing he wore.

I'd seen this type of clothing, a cloth draped over the torso that ended in a loose girdle, every now and then since we entered Diospyro. It was the native dress of northern Aker, according to Shiran. A single-edged sword hung at his waist, and several wooden decorations fashioned after some sort of creature dangled from his neck.

For some reason, the moment our eyes met, I felt a strange sensation. It wasn't necessarily uncomfortable, but it was strong enough that I couldn't ignore it. Before I could figure out what it was, though, the young man turned to the boy standing next to him.

"Say, Aketora, isn't this the fellow countryman you spoke of yesterday?"

"Like I give a shit..."

The boy we'd met in the inn the other day, who already had a grumpy expression to begin with, scowled even more.

"Here you go again, acting in a way that's sure to make you more enemies," the young man replied in both remonstrance and exasperation. But despite his tone, his mannerisms remained gentle.



“Weren’t you worried about what your compatriots were doing?” the young man continued. “Why waste an opportunity like this?”

While the visitor looked like he wanted nothing to do with us, this man seemed rather interested. He smiled and walked our way. I didn’t sense any hostility, nor did I feel uncomfortable. His demeanor was actually pleasing. But I was still my master’s guard today. Regardless of this man’s attitude, I had to remain vigilant.

I stayed glued to my master and slipped my hand into a large pocket inside my apron. My fingers fell upon the hilt of my ax. So long as I was by my master’s side, I had to remain armed. This pocket worked like a magic bag in that the capacity was extended, so I could pull out my weapon at any time.

Perhaps noticing my wariness, the man stopped before he got too close.

“A pleasure to meet you. My name is Thaddeus,” he said, then glanced calmly at the boy next to him. “The grumpy-looking one over here is Fukatsu Aketora. I have to say, I never expected to meet one of his kind in this country.”

“What business do you have with us?” my master replied cautiously. He didn’t openly show any displeasure the way the visitor—Fukatsu Aketora—did, but he was still on guard. But that was a normal reaction when a complete stranger called you out in the middle of town.

On the other hand, Thaddeus was all smiles. “Nothing serious,” he answered. “I was wondering what fate brought you, a person from the same far-off lands as Aketora, here at the same time as us. Could you spare a minute to talk? Oh, please be at ease. I know of your...circumstances, to an extent.”

“To what extent?”

“That you appeared in the forest. That you possess power. That you came in numbers previously believed to be unthinkable.”

Thaddeus had kept his wording somewhat vague, probably in case anyone overheard us. Still, it was clear that he was talking about visitors from afar.

“What do you want to talk about?” my master asked.

“To put it plainly, I’d like to know what Aketora’s countrymen are up to.”

“So you just want information?”

“Well, that’s not all.” Thaddeus chuckled, a refreshing smile spreading across his lips. “I’m also simply interested in speaking with you. Just as I said before, some kind of fate has brought us together. If possible, I’d like to become friends with you. Fortunately, you don’t appear to be bad people.”

He didn’t appear to be lying, so I felt it would be okay to talk with him. However, this was my master’s decision to make. I waited to see what he would do, but he seemed to be hesitant. He was curious as to why another visitor was here in Aker. And since they’d approached us in such a friendly manner, there was no reason not to engage with them.

“So, would you mind speaking with us for a bit?” Thaddeus continued, sensing that my master wasn’t completely opposed to the idea. “Of course, I won’t probe into your circumstances. If you could tell us whatever you’re fine sharing, it would be a great—”

Just then, an irritated roar resounded through the street.

“Thaddeus!”

“Aketora...”

Looking surprised, Thaddeus turned to his companion.

“Give it a rest, Thaddeus,” Fukatsu Aketora said, gathering the attention of the people around us. “It’s pointless to get involved with ’em.”

He seemed to greatly dislike us. He was practically spitting hostility in our direction. He then quickly glanced at me as I remained nestled against my master.

“Anyway, this guy’s prolly trash like the rest of ’em. Draggin’ a buncha chicks around like trophies is proof.”

“You insolent—” I started, my hand tensing around the hilt of my ax on reflex.

“Stop, Rose.”

Even though this Fukatsu Aketora was ridiculing him, my master stopped me from doing anything rash by grabbing my arm, the one still wrapped around his.

“Very well...”

I let go of my ax. While it was careless of me to let my composure slip, I was acting as my master’s guard, so I had no intention of leaping into battle spurred only by my emotions.

“Hmph.”

Fukatsu Aketora snorted and turned on his heel. His attitude annoyed me, but I couldn’t possibly expose my master to danger. I stood there and quietly watched him walk away. Once he was gone, the hustle and bustle of the crowd returned.

Thaddeus sighed deeply. “I’m very sorry for Aketora’s rude behavior.”

“It’s fine. I don’t really mind.”

Just as he’d said, my master didn’t look particularly offended. He probably hadn’t liked Fukatsu Aketora mocking him like that, but he still acted indifferent. My master was like this sometimes. Perhaps his experiences in this world had shaped his disposition.

“He saw me with one of my other companions yesterday, a girl whom the innkeeper had mistaken for my wife,” my master explained. “It was just a misunderstanding, but now he sees me walking around with another girl. I could see how he’d get a bad impression of me.”

“I truly am sorry,” Thaddeus replied. My master’s indifferent attitude had spurred his guilt, and he looked even more apologetic than before. “Aketora has gotten tired of the other visitors’ attitudes, so he fled from them.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. That’s what he told me, but I never thought he would hate his compatriots this much. I acted too rashly...”

Thaddeus probably wasn’t conscious of this, but we’d learned some interesting new information from him. That boy was a cheater, but he wasn’t currently part of the exploration team. Iino Yuna had told us that some of the cheaters at Fort Ebenus had quit the exploration team, so maybe he was one of them.

“I can’t leave Aketora on his own, so I’ll be taking my leave. He doesn’t have a translation runestone with him right now, you see.”

“Okay.”

“How unfortunate,” Thaddeus added with a sigh. “I really did want to speak with you some more.”

“Why are you so fixated on talking to us?” my master asked suspiciously.

“Hm? Oh, I see. I suppose it does seem a little strange,” Thaddeus answered, looking embarrassed as if he’d only realized this now. “For some reason, I don’t feel we’re meant to be strangers.”

My master didn’t respond.

“Sorry for saying something so strange. If fate allows it, let us meet again.”

Even as he parted, Thaddeus was nothing but gentle.



Once Thaddeus had vanished into the flow of the crowd, I finally relaxed. The two of them really had left quite the impression. Fukatsu Aketora’s attitude was one thing, but Thaddeus also had a peculiar air about him.

“How strange,” my master muttered.

Still clinging to his arm, I turned to look at him.

“Master, are you also curious about this Thaddeus person?”

He looked puzzled. “Hm? No, I’m talking about the translation runestone.”

“The translation runestone...? What about it?”

“Just now, Thaddeus said Fukatsu wasn’t carrying one, right? That implies that Thaddeus has it. I’m just a little hung up on that detail.”

“That’s not all that strange. Even in our group, both Shiran and Kei have a translation runestone, right?”

“That’s because they were the only ones who could use them at the time. But now you can too.”

“Yes, because I learned how.”

“Right,” my master replied with a nod. “And it’s not just you. I hear Katou is almost at the level where she can use one. Given time, visitors can learn how to use a translation runestone. Fukatsu should know how to as well. I mean, he was on his own yesterday.”

“Now that you mention it...”

When we encountered Fukatsu Aketora the other day, Thaddeus hadn’t been with him. Perhaps he’d been in their room or had already left the inn. Either way, Fukatsu had been able to converse with the innkeeper. That meant he could use a translation runestone.

“If he can use one, it’d make more sense for him to carry it,” I concluded. “I’m surprised you managed to notice so quickly.”

“I’ve had to be careful about being stuck in town on my own, after all. When I first learned of translation runestones in Fort Tilia, I spent quite a bit of time racking my brain over how to handle communicating in the future. How could I learn to use one? And even before that, how could I get one?” My master paused, suddenly realizing something. “Hang on... How did *they* get one?”

“If I remember correctly, translation runestones aren’t really in circulation.”

“Yeah. They’re normally only used to communicate with visitors, so there’s no general demand for them. The Holy Church should have all of them since it’s their job to work with saviors. I’ve heard that the Empire has some stockpiled because their territory is so vast and they’re more likely to make first contact with any visitors. Still, they’re only in military facilities, and we’re in Aker.”

“Maybe Thaddeus is from the Empire?” I suggested.

“In that case, why would he be dressed like a native Akerian?”

“That’s true... Maybe he’s in a similar position to Shiran and Kei?”

“Well, we can’t count that out. Our situation isn’t all that different from Fukatsu’s.” My master nodded, even though he still seemed to have something on his mind. “He’s probably got a lot going on. He seems to fervently hate visitors. I’m sure he saw some things.”

Something had to have happened to Fukatsu, and it couldn’t have been good.

Or it could be that Fukatsu Aketora was simply a moody person.

“If you’re curious, then shall we go after them and probe them for more information?” I suggested.

I was reluctant to allow my master to further interact with someone who held him in such contempt, but if it was necessary, then I had to let it be. However, my master shot down my suggestion almost immediately.

“No, let’s not. Even if Thaddeus is friendly, Fukatsu really does seem to hate me. There’s no need to go treading on a tiger’s tail.”

“A tiger? To stroke a dragon’s whisker and tread on a tiger’s tail. This is an idiom from your world, correct?”

“Huh, I’m surprised you know about it. I didn’t know that first half with the dragon. Did you hear it from Katou?”

“Yes. I think Mana heard it from Mizushima Miho. According to Mana, she was an avid reader...or rather, an indiscriminate one.”

“Oh really? That reminds me, back when we were living in the Woodlands, Lily taught me a lot I didn’t know using Mizushima’s knowledge.”

Out of respect for the dead, it was difficult to ask Mana about Mizushima Miho, so my master hadn’t had many opportunities to learn more about her. He had no idea about her hobbies.

“I’d wondered why Mizushima knew about draining blood from wild game...” my master said. “I guess that’s why.”

As a small digression, the reason the monster meat he’d lived off of in the Woodlands had tasted so bad was because Lily, or rather, Mizushima Miho, knew that the blood had to be drained, but had no idea how to do it. Since then, Shiran had taught us about rigor mortis and the like, and about curing meat to give it a good flavor. When it was properly treated, monster meat was considered a delicacy in the fortresses of the Woodlands.

“We’ve gone off track,” my master said. “Well, that’s the gist of it. We’re better off not prodding them more than this.”

“Understood.”

“Besides, this is a rare occasion for me to spend some time alone with you. It’d be a waste to squander that.”

He’d jokingly added that last part, probably because he wasn’t seeing me as a woman. Still, it was a little unfair of him to throw it out there so casually.

“We should enjoy ourselves,” he added.

“Yes.”

I was so happy that I was afraid I’d lose my concentration and all expression would vanish from my face. I had to focus hard to keep it under control.



After we’d gone through the stalls, we returned to the main street lined with shops. This was my first time entering a store. Not only was it a new experience to look around the general goods and weapon stores, but it was a great learning opportunity for me as a crafter.

“Oh! Master! It looks like they sell runestones here!”

How many times had it been now? We entered another store, and I saw runestones and magic tools lining the shelves. They didn’t sell any powerful magic tools that could be used in battle, though. They mostly had simple runestones for everyday life and the magic tools they could be used with.

I was captivated by everything I saw. In my master’s world, they had something called mass production through mechanical industrialization, but here, most things were made by hand. Just looking at it all made me feel like I could improve my crafting skills.

“Master! Over there—” I started to say, turning around with vigor, when I met my master’s eyes. “Oh...”

It didn’t appear to be a coincidence. He was looking at me more than the goods on the shelves. How long had he been like that? Ever since we entered the store? Or maybe even before that?

“F-Forgive me, Master. I lost my composure.”

He’d seen me getting carried away. Now that I thought of it, I’d been completely engrossed for some time. I vaguely recalled tugging on his arm and

dragging him from one shop to another. My body tensed up in embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it,” my master said with a shrug. “I’m having fun too. I mean, we never had the chance to leisurely look around at shops before. Besides...it’s fun watching you get all excited like a kid, Rose.”

“P-Please don’t say such strange things.”

If my body were able to blush, I would’ve surely turned red.

“L-Let’s move on to the next shop,” I said, pulling on my master’s arm as if to distract him from my earlier behavior.

“Okay, but just give me a second. Could you wait outside for me?”

“Huh? Yes, of course.”

“I’ll be right with you.”

I did as he said and left the store. My master came out shortly after, and we went on to the next shop. In the end, we walked around town until the sun started to set.

“I guess we should start heading back,” my master said.

“Very well.”

Our outing had been both fun and beneficial. We’d walked among a large crowd and had seen so many new types of tools. We’d also managed to buy several goods necessary for our journey, as well as some books from this world for Lily.

We exited the last shop and decided to return to the inn.

“Huh...?” my master said in confusion.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“I thought I saw Shiran just now.”

“Shiran? Forgive me, I didn’t notice.”

I looked over the crowded street, but I couldn’t spot her blonde hair and white armor. Shiran was a unique servant, so we couldn’t share much through

the mental path or sense each other's location.

"Maybe I'm just mistaken," my master said. "I only caught the slightest glance. She shouldn't be out here, anyway."

While we were perusing the shops, we'd walked all the way down the main street to the very edge of town. We could even see the sturdy iron gate that led to the outside from here. Among the hustle and bustle, merchants were just entering the town, tiredly limping along.

"Shiran was headed to that military facility you visited yesterday, right?" I asked.

"That's what she said. It's closer to the center of town."

"There are a lot of buildings along the walls for defensive purposes. Perhaps she and the man she was meeting had a reason to come out here?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I might've just been seeing things."

We continued walking arm in arm and talking. I was acutely aware of my master's presence by my side. After spending a whole day like this, I'd gotten accustomed to being so close to him. Among my giddy emotions, I could sense something warm gradually spreading through me. Sadly, I knew this day would eventually come to an end.

"Um, Master. May I have a moment of your time?"

I came to a stop around the time the inn came into sight. The setting sun was dyeing the town rose madder. I reached into my apron pocket and handed over what was inside.

"What's this...?" he asked, looking surprised.

I'd given him a pair of black bracers. The design on each one was slightly different. The left bracer had yellow and blue accents, while the right had red and green.

Currently, my master kept a bandage around his left arm to hide Asarina. The wrap was made from Gerbera's threads, so it provided a fair amount of protection, but it still had its limits. These bracers were something I had come up with during my various conversations with Mikihiko.

“Could you please check if they fit?” I asked.

“Sure... Yup, fits perfectly.”

We couldn't expose Asarina out in the open like this, so for now, he placed the bracer over his bandage. But even without it, the bracer was designed in such a way that it covered the back of his hand.

“I made these Asarina Bracers so Asarina could move about freely. The part on the back of your hand moves, allowing her to jump out at any moment. There are other gimmicks too, so I shall give you a full explanation of how it works later. Also, one more thing...”

I put my hand back into my apron pocket to pull out my next gift.

“A shortsword...or I guess, a dagger?” my master said.

Even with the hilt, it was only three or so handwidths long. My master pulled the dagger partway out of its scabbard. The bewitching shine of the blade seemed to captivate him, bringing his movements to a halt.

“This is pretty amazing,” he said. “Is this maybe even greater than your pseudo-Damascus steel sword?”

“I can confidently say that this is the greatest work I've ever made. However, I used special materials, so I must apologize for its limited length.”

“Special materials? Did you use some kind of weird tree?”

“Well, something like that.”

I'd been trying to make this dagger for a while. I'd based it on Mana's advice.

“Please call it the Rosette Dagger.”

Mana had picked the name, and I'd had no objections. There was no other name to possibly give it. I'd created it, and I'd also supplied the materials. My body was that of a puppet. It was made of wood, and thus could be used for my craft.

Mana had suggested the idea. As always, she'd come up with an amazing concept. If my body could protect my master at all times like this, then there was nothing more I could wish for. I'd taken damage multiple times now, so

there were several loose parts I could use as raw materials. The dagger my master was holding was made from the pieces of my lower half that had broken off during Takaya Jun's attack. The material was difficult to handle, and I'd failed multiple times, but the end result was the greatest work of my life.

"It's insufficient for your primary armament, but I made this with the hope that it will protect you."

"Thank you. I'll treasure it," my master said before giving me a wry smile. "You got one up on me here."

"Master?"

"I also have something to give you."

He put the dagger away and wrapped both his hands around mine. When he removed them, a cute pendant remained in my palm. I went stiff with shock.

"Is this...a magic pendant?" I asked.

"To commemorate the day. Well, it's nothing that grandiose. This runestone raises your stamina, at least a little bit. In Aker, they apparently use them to decorate a knight's blade. The effect is practically nonexistent, so it's more of a good luck charm. This is a decorative pendant made in that spirit." My master paused, scratching his cheek. "Sorry. I wanted to buy you something nicer, but it doesn't look like they sell anything like that here. It seems kind of shabby compared to your present..."

"Not at all!" I exclaimed, shaking my head. My braided hair swayed about behind me. "That's not true at all. I'm happy. Really, really happy..."

Was it truly okay for such happiness to befall me? I looked down at the pendant in my palm. It was a circular gem attached to a hoop of string. The gem was rose madder and looked like a crystallization of today's setting sun.

"Thank you very much."

I held the pendant close to my heart and cherished this moment.



There was one thing I figured out from this experience; I truly did wish for what came after a hug from my master. I still didn't know what that was,

exactly. I didn't even know what kind of relationship I wanted with him.

Nevertheless, I didn't want today to be a one-time thing. To make that happen, I had to get my master to hug me first. I would have to learn everything up until that point so that I could know what came after. I would have to strive for that day to come. I felt like the red pendant dangling on my chest was supporting me in this.



Two days later, we left Diospyro, a town I now regarded fondly. In the end, we never found out why Fukatsu Aketora and Thaddeus were there. We didn't get the chance to speak with them again. Thaddeus had told us, "If fate allows it, let us meet again." Maybe that meant there was no such fate between us. That was what I believed, anyway.

Several days later, however, my perception would change. From this point on, our paths were destined to cross. Our initial meeting had been a coincidence, but in a certain sense, it was an inevitability. Before that could happen, though, we had to have another unavoidable encounter.

It was unforeseeable... Well, not really. We'd been warned about it beforehand. But with everything that had happened since, we'd simply forgotten. Not that remembering would've changed anything. We never thought the warning would imply such a thing, and we could have never imagined things would end up the way they did.

We left town to return to the others, completely unaware of what awaited us.

Chapter 10: The Fox and the Wolf's Evening Part 1

Ayame's POV

I'm going to protect everyone! As I thought that, I snuck off in the middle of the night. Following the moonlight, I ran through the many bushes covering the mountain.

This would normally be bedtime, but I'd gotten plenty of sleep earlier riding on top of Gerbera's belly. Everything was ready. I wasn't tired at all. Sorry, that was a bit of a lie. I was a little tired. But I had plenty of energy. My plan was perfect.

The reason I was sneaking away in the night was to expose a certain villain's schemes. I sniffed at the air to track my prey. I was all alone in the darkness, but it wasn't scary at all. Sorry, that was another lie.

My enemy was enormous and terrifying. I mean, she was huge and had two heads. When I saw her the other day, there were all these slithering and wriggling things too. So scary. Just remembering it made me tremble.

Still, I couldn't cower in fear. I had to do my best to protect everyone. I was the only one who could. I mean, my master wasn't really on guard against her. Lily and Gerbera imitated his behavior.

Come on! She's dangerous! She's scary! I let out an indignant huff. I knew. I remembered that first time we met her. It was back when I was hiding in Lily's belly so that we could go to some place or other. A ton of monsters attacked, and I didn't really know what was going on, but it was a big disaster. And then *she* showed up.

The moment I heard a growl, the metal people fell to the floor. I tried to protect Kei, just as my master had asked me to, but I got slapped aside by a foreleg right away. Lily healed me, but the pain had my tail and ears all tight for a while.

She's dangerous! I was the only one who knew that. I was the only one who

could protect everyone. That thought made my heart burn. I cheered myself on, suppressing the terror and the trembling, and continued running through the mountain.

Every night, she wandered off somewhere on her own to do something. She was definitely up to no good. I had no idea what exactly it was, but she was obviously scheming some sort of unthinkable evil. I had to expose her.

She's close... I'm almost there. I carefully snuck my way through a bush. My tiny body was great at times like these. It was also convenient for petting. My master wouldn't be able to carry me around if I got bigger.

Wait. No. Stop. I have to focus. Okay! I made sure not to reveal myself through my scent and took a peek at the scene on the other side of the bush. And right there was my prey, the bloodstained figure of the villainous wolf.

An enormous monster lay on the ground, the wolf's snout poking around inside its belly. I could hear the sound of bones breaking and muscles tearing. It was so shocking my mind blanked. I probably shouldn't have done that.

"Who's there?"

One of the wolf's heads snapped up and turned my way, dragging entrails along with it. Meat splattered about, wetting the ground with dark blood. I panted in fear, my breath feeling as hot as the flames of hell, as the rotten scent of death washed over me.

Six burning eyes glared at me. I met all of them...and figured this was where I was going to die.

"You're..."

She tried to say something, but I didn't hear any of it. I only heard dribbling at my feet, and then all strength left my body.

"Kuu..."

Everything went black.



I felt like I'd had a bad dream. I opened my eyes, and immediately realized something was wrong. I couldn't sense everyone else nearby. Did something

happen? I tried to remember, when a voice suddenly called out to me.

“You’re awake.”

She was right next to me—the two-headed gray wolf, Berta. I yelped, nearly fainting a second time. A giant wolf head was close enough to eat me up with just the slightest stretch of the neck.

Scary! So, so scary! My tail curled up between my legs. I had failed. I couldn’t beat her on my own. I’d known I had to stay unseen before I started this. I was going to die now. She was going to eat me. If I got eaten, I couldn’t see everyone anymore. I didn’t want that.

Master... Gerbera... I let out a whine as their two faces came to mind, but they weren’t here with me. *I’m lonely... I’m scared...*

“If you’re up, then go back already.”

Berta said something as she watched me tremble on the ground.

I’m going to be eaten... Noooo... Wait. What?

“Get going already. That big spider will worry again if she notices.”

[Huh...?] I muttered. Did I mishear her? [You’re not going to kill me?]

“Why the hell would I kill the likes of you?”

Uuuh? Hmmm? This is different from what I’d expected!

[Why not?] I asked.

“I just told you. I have no reason to.”

Hmmm? I cocked my head, and Berta looked down at me in exasperation.

“Why did you go out of your way to chase me if you’re so scared that you wet yourself?”

[I-I didn’t pee!]

How rude! I started growling in defiance. Berta didn’t really seem to care.

“You did. This is the second time. Remember the first time? After the battle with the Mad Beast, I came out to meet all of you, and you yelped, wet yourself, and fainted.”

[Y-Y-Y-Y-You've got it wrong! You're wrong!]

Why say such a thing?! I finally, FINALLY, FORGOT! Because of that, all of my memories from the time were gone. When morning came, I'd found myself lying in Kei's arms with Lily and Gerbera nearby. It had been a terrible defeat, so I'd tried to wipe it from my mind. *And yet! And yet...! Hnnnngh!* I shot to my feet and stared Berta down.

[M-More importantly! You've been sneaking out at night and doing something! You can't change the subject on me!]

"You're the one trying to change the damn subject here..." Berta answered, exasperated as ever and turning her heads. "Whatever. I was just getting food."

She didn't appear to be panicking. It was as if she was just telling the honest truth.

[Food...?]

I turned to look in the same direction, spotting the dead, half-eaten monster. I hadn't realized due to the shock earlier. This was a type of monster we'd started seeing once we entered these mountains. If I remembered right...

[That thing my master calls a lesser salamander?]

"Hmm. You've seen one before?"

[Mhm. Gerbera, like, gave it a big tug with her threads, then it went *wham!*]

"You make it sound so damn simple. It isn't a weak monster. At the very least, it's among the strongest in the Kitrus Mountains." Berta paused to shake one of her heads. "I suppose from that spider's perspective, all of the monsters in the mountains are the same."

Hm? Did she just praise Gerbera? She did, right? Eheh heh... Yup, Gerbera's amazing. Eheh heh... She could be somewhat careless, but I was very proud she was my big sister. Berta was free to praise her to the moon.

[Ah, hang on,] I said, suddenly coming back to my senses, [we're talking about your evil schemes here!]

She'd almost managed to deceive me there.

“And I’m telling you there’s none of that going on.”

You can’t trick me! my eyes told her as I glared her way. Berta narrowed her eyes and looked back at me.

“Hmm, I see. I suppose this is my fault.”

[Hwuh? S-So you really are up to no good!]

“No. I’m thinking of how I once wounded you during a surprise attack. It’s natural for you to be suspicious of me.”

[Ummm?]

“First, I believe it’s proper to provide you with an apology regarding that incident. Fortunately, the relationship between my king and yours has settled down, for the time being. It is best to apologize when given the chance.”

Berta’s tail casually waved about in the air.

“Sorry for hurting you,” she continued. “It was unavoidable, seeing that it was my king’s command, but I do feel bad about it. Please forgive me.”

Did she really just apologize? Does she really feel sorry? I continued glaring at her, but she did nothing more than quietly return my gaze.

Hmm... It feels true? Actually, she seems kinda lonely? She doesn’t like hurting people? She doesn’t like being hated? That was what it felt like to me. So what was I to do? What would my master do?

Mrrgh! I hate thinking about complicated things!

[If you’re seriously sorry, then I’ll forgive you,] I said.

“Thank you.”

She’d said it quietly, but she’d sounded just a little happy. I also wagged my tail about, just a little happy myself.

[Huh? But in that case, what are you doing here?] I asked.

“I already told you. I’m having a meal. Hunting, so to speak.”

[I can tell by looking at that.] I shot a quick glance over to the dead lesser salamander. [But you vanish every night, right? Do you always hunt at night?]

Berta was a bad monster. That was what I'd thought, but the reason I'd doubted her was because her nightly disappearing act was suspicious. I didn't doubt her anymore, but I still had questions.

[Are you that hungry? Is dinner not enough?]

"That's not it."

[So why?]

Berta thought it over for a bit, then said, "To become stronger." It was a simple answer, and she said it earnestly. "My king discovered the law of killing beings who possess mana and eating them to gain even more mana... This is the quickest path to getting stronger. As my king's pawn, I have to become stronger."

[That's why you go out hunting every night?]

"That's right."

I see. She's always with us during the day, so she can't go hunting, huh?

"Have I cleared up your suspicions?" she asked.

[Yup.]

"That's good," she said. The relief in her voice didn't sound like a lie. "Then go back. That worrywart of a spider will be furious at this rate."

[Mm. Okay.]

"Oh, wait a moment. I'll take you back. It's considerably dangerous on your own."

Berta got up off the ground.

Mrrgh. Treating me like a kid? Everyone treated me like a child. Even Gerbera. I can fight too! Uhhh... I'm the weakest of my master's servants, though...

"Give me a minute to clean this up," Berta said, going back to the dead monster.

[Ah. Wait for me.] I called her to a stop before she got back to work. [Hey, hey, Berta? Can I eat too?]

“Hm? Are you hungry?”

[Umm, not really?]

“Then why?”

[I also want to get stronger, I think. Eating monsters will make me stronger, right? I want to be useful to my master too.]

“I see.” It looked like Berta’s eyes became a little kinder. “Fine. Do as you like.”

[Really?!]

Yay! I wagged my great poofy tail around as a show of thanks. Just maybe, Berta was a really nice monster. *I’m not being enticed by food, okay?!*

I mean, even though she was treating me like a child, she said she would take me back as if it were the obvious thing to do. Now that I thought about it, I’d heard that Berta obeyed her master absolutely. Maybe there were times she had to do things she didn’t want to do. In that case, maybe the Berta who injured me wasn’t the real Berta.

So what was the real Berta like? My curiosity about her began bubbling up. I was a curious monster by nature. If I saw something sparkling in front of me, I was the type to jump in before thinking of anything else. I’d been totally scared of her before this, so I’d never talked to her. Now that I had, I was curious.

[Hey, Berta?]

“What?” Berta replied bluntly, but I didn’t find her scary anymore. “Get eating already.”

[Mm, I will...] The two of us continued talking while eating the dead monster.
[Berta, you got stronger by killing and eating, right?]

“What about it?”

[Is that how you got that form I saw?]

I thought she would deflect my question, but Berta turned one of her heads my way.

“So you did see me.”

[Well, I guess?]

I cocked my head to the side. By “that form,” I meant what I’d seen right before I lost consciousness earlier. Despite passing out, my memories were still intact. When I’d peeked through the bushes at Berta, six eyes had turned to look at me. Berta didn’t have just one wolf head, meaning she didn’t have just two eyes. But with two heads, she should’ve had four eyes. In which case, the remaining two were...

“If you’ve already seen it, I suppose there’s no point in cramping myself in here any longer,” Berta muttered quietly.

Her back made an amazing squishy noise. Something like a white rod covered in icky stuff pierced out through her fur. Stretched out toward the sky, it looked much like a human arm.

Chapter 11: The Fox and the Wolf's Evening Part 2

Ayame's POV

Bodily fluids splattered about. Something closely resembling a human arm burst out of Berta's back. I wondered whether it hurt as another shot out. The two arms grasped the wolf's gray bristles, and rising up with a splash as if breaking the surface of a lake was...the upper body of a human girl.

"It really is more comfortable like this," she muttered quietly while turning my way.

I'd seen this form earlier. Had I not, I would have been completely stunned. Up until now, Berta was a big wolf with tentacles coming from her waist. Now she looked more like a girl who'd turned into a monster with the lower body of a wolf with tentacles.

She was kind of like Gerbera, I guess? That made me feel a little affection for her. Her wet black hair hung loosely over her expressionless face as she turned to me with her mean-looking eyes. Her clear, tan pupils were really pretty. She was probably about the same age as my master and the others. Her facial features looked more like his than Shiran's. That made her a little different from Gerbera.

[Is that your true form, Berta?] I asked.

"Yes. My king calls me a scylla," she answered calmly.

Despite her demeanor, my whiskers were tingling. Something inside me was so very scared. She probably wasn't at Gerbera or Lily's level, but I could guess that she was very strong. If I'd seen her like this before talking to her today, I probably would have been shivering nonstop. But now I knew Berta wasn't a bad monster, so there was no need to be scared.

"You're hardier than I thought," Berta said in slight admiration as I stared up at her.

[What do you mean?]

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand.” She lightly shook her head, her icky tentacles flopping about and matching her movements. “More importantly, you’ve stopped eating.”

Oh, right. It’s mealtime.

“There’s a bit of mist in the air. It isn’t an obstacle for us given our noses, but it’s still dangerous if our vision is hampered. Eat quickly.”

Just as Berta had said, a white blur was beginning to cover our surroundings. There were a lot of clouds in the sky today. I could get back using my nose, but it was a little risky if I couldn’t see. I decided to focus on the meal in front of me.

Berta’s wolf heads also went back to eating. Once in a while, she would use her human hands to pull some unneeded skin out of the way. *How nice... That looks super convenient.* Paws weren’t really useful for that kind of thing.

[Hey, hey, Berta?]

Once I was starting to feel full, I started talking to Berta again. She looked like she could still eat a lot, considering how much bigger she was than me, so I thought we could chat in the meantime.

[You’ve eaten a whole lot to get stronger, right?]

“Yes. That isn’t all, of course.”

[Did you gain that form by getting stronger?]

“Yes.”

[So! So! Can I become like you too?!]

Her wolf heads remained focused on eating while her human half turned toward me.

“Do you want to become like me?” she asked.

[Yup. I was thinking maybe it would make my master happy.]

“Happy...?” Berta said, squinting. “Why would your king be happy if you become like me?”

[Umm... If we become cute girls, our master gets happy, apparently.]

I'd heard this some time ago while resting in Mana's lap and listening to her talk with Rose. I was half-asleep at the time, so I didn't really know the full details, but I kinda remembered something along those lines.

"Hmm... So that kind of king exists," Berta murmured.

I could barely hear her. She was probably talking to herself. I cocked my head curiously. From the way her tail drooped and swayed about, it looked like she was envious, but that only lasted for a second.

"Is your king not a human? Would he be fine with a form as damned as mine?"

[He would.]

I was positive he wouldn't mind. It'd be nice if I could become like Lily, but turning into something like Berta would work too. I knew that Gerbera, who also had the lower half of a monster, had been getting along well with our master lately.

[I'm sure it would surprise him. Is it possible I can do that?]

"Hmm. I wonder..."

Berta sank into thought. She groaned, her expression somber. Seeing her like this, I found that though she resembled Gerbera, her personality was more like Rose's. She was super serious. I could tell by watching her that she was putting a whole lot of thought into this. Her wolf heads kept eating, though.

The sound of chewing went on for a while, until she said, "It'd be useless to do it the exact same way as I did. This form is characteristic to me."

[Oh...]

How sad. Things weren't going to go the way I'd hoped.

"But..." Berta continued, "I fought many monsters and ate their corpses. Among them were those who could transform their bodies using glamor magic to falsify their forms."

[Like a doppelganger?]

"Yes. That would be an example. A doppelganger's characteristic ability is

powerful, allowing one to transform into anything it has seen. There are also monsters who can only transform into a single specific form. For example, ones that change a small portion of their body into metal, grow wings, or change their skeletal structure. Among them, there are those who can take on a human form.”

[A specific form... Is that how your ability works?]

“It is. Transforming one’s body is a fairly unique specialty. Otherwise... Right. I’ve seen other fox-type monsters use glamor magic. With training, it’s possible you can do something similar in your own way.”

[Really?!]

“Yes. How about giving it a try?”

[Yeah!]

I hopped up and down and wagged my fluffy tail about. This was thrilling! Would my master be shocked if I looked like a human?

Okay! Time to give it my all!



“You have no talent...”

[Noooo!]

After Berta finished her meal, she gave me her honest opinion. My ears and tail stood on end in shock.

[D-Does that mean I couldn’t use it at all to begin with? Like, as a monster?]

“No. Your mana is moving about a little. It doesn’t seem you were born without the ability to do so.”

Berta had continued to help me while she ate. She had told me about the abilities of all sorts of monsters she’d fought, and she’d watched me try the things she’d mentioned and taught me whether I had a knack for it. We’d excluded the options that seemed hopeless, arriving at the conclusion that I could maybe transform a portion of my body. That was when she told me I had no talent.

“It isn’t that you’re incapable of transforming,” she continued. “Your mana flow is just too feeble.”

[So I have no talent? Oh well...] This did make sense. My tail was all dangly now. [I have no talent. I’m the weakest of my master’s servants...]

“There’s no need to get depressed,” Berta said, her voice a little gentler than before. “Besides, weakness has nothing to do with this. It’s unfortunate you couldn’t accomplish your goal, but don’t be mistaken. We’ve only been talking about transformation and glamor. That’s not necessarily the case for anything else.”

[You mean it? But I’m actually really weak, you know?]

“For now, you are. You haven’t lived all that long, so you don’t have enough mana yet. Given time, you’re sure to gain power and surpass that damn spider.”

[Hwuh?!]

My droopy tail suddenly shot straight up.

“Why are you so surprised? For example, my king’s power is to make others his pawns. But he can’t subjugate anything with a mind too strong for him to dominate. These are simply exceptions. In other words, he can dominate anything without a will no matter how strong they are.”

Berta paused there as if remembering something.

“Your king’s power is the opposite. His ability makes any monster strong enough to possess a will into his servant. You fulfilled this condition despite your young age, so that means you should have the makings of a powerful monster.”

[U-Uhhh?]

This was getting too complicated for me. I could tell she was praising me, but I couldn’t understand most of what she was saying.

“Despite your youth, you’ve seen a fair amount of carnage already. Being connected to your king at your age has likely had a positive influence on your growth. If there’s anyone who could surpass your potential... I suppose that parasite in your king’s arm is about the only one.”

[Asarina?]

“Yes. It’s because of the unique soil that parasite grows from. That thing is basically a miraculous being.”

Ooh. I don’t get it, but Asarina is amazing... Well, my brain was basically at its limit by this point. Berta had no way of knowing this, of course, so she kept explaining.

“However, such a birthplace also has its limits. So long as the soil is weak, the parasite’s talent won’t bloom. Plant-type monsters generally have an aptitude for glamor magic, so it might be possible for... Hm? What’s wrong?”

Feeling dizzy, I whimpered, and Berta stopped her explanation.

“Oh, sorry. Was it a little too complicated for you?” Berta asked with a strained smile. “In any case, I’m sure you’ll one day be able to transform. Even if you don’t specialize in it, you have the potential to at least accomplish it.”

Her tone at the end was like that of a teacher. Honestly, I still didn’t understand half of what she was saying. In short, I just had to try my best, right? In that case, it was simple.

[Okay! I’ll give it my all!] I declared, puffing my snout up into the air.

“I’m sure it’ll take a long time, but keep striving to better yourself.”

[I wonder if my master will be happy.]

Thoughts of the future had my heart dancing. Just imagining it made my tail waggle. The future sounded so fun. I couldn’t wait! Berta had said it would take a long time, but how long did she mean exactly? A day? Two? Maybe three? *Umm... What’s after three?* I didn’t really know. Maybe it would take even longer?

[Hey, hey, Berta? Can I ask you something? Huh? Berta?]

I cheerfully called out to her, then cocked my head. Berta looked out of it. She wasn’t reacting to my voice.

Noticing the curiosity in my eyes, she finally blinked and came back to her senses.

“Oh, sorry. It seems I zoned out.”

[Is something wrong?] I asked in a worried tone.

“No. It’s nothing serious,” Berta replied, shaking her human head. “I just find your king mysterious for rejoicing about all of you transforming into humans.”

[Mysterious? Why?]

I let out a curious whine, and Berta diligently answered, despite her own hesitation.

“My king doesn’t like this form...” she said, putting her hand to her naked chest. “I thought that was normal. That’s why I was surprised when you said your king is different.”

[Hmm? Is that so...? That’s weird.]

I cocked my head again. Berta was, in fact, kinda scary looking, but I didn’t think it was something to hate her for. *To each their own...I guess?*

[Uhh... Sooo... Have you been hiding this form because...]

“Yes. It was my king’s command,” Berta said with a nod. “Having said that, I don’t really like this form myself.”

[Huh? Really?]

I stared at her in wonder. Berta had said that she’d obtained this form by getting stronger. If so, it should’ve been something she could be proud of. But that wasn’t the case, apparently.

“Whenever I look at myself like this, I’m reminded of my past,” Berta said, looking down at her five-fingered hand. There was something swaying deep behind her tan eyes. “It’s a memory of failure, back before I had a name. I’m filled with regret every time I recall it. Why couldn’t I be Anton? Why am I Berta? I know regretting it doesn’t mean anything at this point...”

She was mostly talking to herself. I didn’t understand a lot of it. Anton was Anton. Berta was Berta. Berta couldn’t be Anton, and Anton couldn’t be Berta. It didn’t make sense to regret that.

Was there some other meaning to her words then? I didn’t even know why

she was reminded of the past when she saw herself like this. I didn't know anything. I couldn't say anything to comfort her.

All I knew was that when I listened to her...my chest hurt. Berta truly regretted *something* from the bottom of her heart. That much even I could understand. I couldn't console her because of my ignorance, but I still felt pain. So I didn't say anything. I shuffled over to one of Berta's hanging wolf heads and licked her snout.

Berta sprang up with a jolt. Both her wolf heads and her human head above them looked down at me in shock. I must've startled her, seeing as how all of her eyes were wide open.

H-Huh? Did I make her angry? I meant to comfort her... Did I do it wrong? Awawawawa... I started panicking, but then Berta's human expression changed. Her lips curved ever so slightly. Her tail wagged about. Her tentacles wriggled. The atmosphere around her changed completely.

"Thank you..." Berta said, brushing back her black hair to try and feign composure. "Also, sorry I made you listen to my meaningless complaints. This is the first time I've revealed this form to anyone other than my king and his servants, so I was a little thrown off."

Phew. Thank goodness. It looked like Berta was back to normal now. She was curt and scary looking, but now I knew she was actually good at looking after others. I didn't like seeing her in pain.

"We should get going soon," she said. "The fog is getting thicker."

[Okay.]

I nodded back obediently, relieved to see her back to normal, and followed her as she walked off.

Oh... I forgot to say something.

[Hey, Berta?] I called out to her as a mist started to fully cover the mountain.

"What?"

[I like that form of yours.]

Berta's human half turned around, her tan eyes like saucers.

[I find it, you know, like, super cool,] I added.

“I see.”

Her reply was brief, but Berta’s tail wagged just slightly. So I also wagged my tail. This little exchange of ours was fun. The two of us marched together through the misty mountain back to everyone else.

[Hey, hey, Berta?]

“What?”

[Can you help me practice transforming again later?]

“You ask that, but you’re really just hoping for more food, aren’t you?”

[Not at all! I’d be happy if there was food, though.]

“Then shall we go hunting together next time? Blowfoxes are skilled hunters. There might be things I can learn from you.”

As we talked, the fog around us got thicker and thicker and thicker. Whiter and whiter and whiter. Mist wrapped around us entirely as if it were holding us in its embrace. I didn’t notice what we were getting ourselves into at all.

Chapter 12: Mystified

Three days quickly passed after we left Diospyro. We'd arrived at the entrance to the path leading into the Kitrus Mountains the previous night, about half a day ahead of schedule. Today, we proceeded down the path itself.

We were ahead because we'd picked up the pace for the last two days. There was a reason we had to. Berta, with whom we'd planned to rendezvous with yesterday, was nowhere to be seen. Was there some sort of trouble brewing?

Worried, I'd sped us up, albeit not to an extent that it pushed Katou and Kei too hard. However, after we entered the mountains, we had no choice but to slow down. A thick fog dominated the entire path.

"I can barely see in front of us," Katou muttered, riding on Rose's back. Our visibility was so poor that we'd decided it would be safer for Katou to do so in the event that we came across a monster. "It's like we're walking through the clouds."

"Yeah. We were warned about this before, but I didn't think it'd be this bad..." I groaned bitterly.

Back when we were still in imperial territory, before we'd entered the Kitrus Mountains, a village chief had warned us about a special mist that covered the mountain path every once in a while. The roads here were in total disrepair, so with such a thick mist obscuring our vision, a wrong step could send us tumbling down a slope. We had to be extra careful.

The fog got denser and denser as we went on. It wasn't really a problem as long as we were being cautious, but I was getting impatient thanks to the current situation. I wanted to confirm that the other group was safe as soon as possible.

"Senpai, should we take a short break?" Katou said, unable to watch my growing irritation. "We've been walking since the morning. I'm sure everyone is tired. Besides...I think it'd be best if you unwind a bit."

I considered this for a moment, then agreed. I knew I was starting to panic, so I obediently accepted her suggestion. I found a slightly open area, sat down, and pulled a water canteen from the pouch hanging at my waist.

Rose had made both items using her imitation runestones. The pouch was a replication of a magic bag, one with increased carrying capacity and preservative effects. Recently, Rose had managed to replicate water, fire, earth, and wind runestones. The canteen used an imitation runestone to create water by pouring mana into it.

After we all got some rest, and those of us who needed it had quenched their thirst and chewed on some dried meat, Kei suddenly spoke up.

“Is something wrong, Shiran?” she asked.

Shiran’s brows were knit together, and she seemed deep in thought. “I feel like I’m forgetting something...”

“Forgetting what?”

“I’ve heard of this situation before...”

Shiran’s blue eyes suddenly shot open. She turned to the spirit who was always by her side. Normally, it casually floated about, but now its ball-like body spun around. The atmosphere suddenly felt tense.

“An enemy?” I asked.

The spirit could detect enemies. Seeing it react, we all reached for our weapons, except Shiran, who knew of this incoming presence before any of us could. Instead, she raised her arm.

“No... It doesn’t seem to be an enemy.”

She pointed at a shadow coming through the veil of mist. By the time we turned to face it, the shadow had jumped back to where it came from. Because of the thick fog, I’d only seen its silhouette. It looked like a four-legged animal.

“A dog...?” I guessed.

“No, Takahiro. That was no dog,” Shiran said. Since she’d noticed the presence first, she’d also had time to identify it. “That was Berta.”

“What?! Really?!”

We were supposed to rendezvous with her yesterday, so my voice went shrill at the news.

“She probably went to call the others,” Shiran replied with a relieved smile. “She didn’t appear to be injured.”

We immediately realized that Shiran was right. As we walked toward where Berta had vanished, another presence closed in on us. This shadow was much smaller and came bolting toward me. We knew right away that this was our cute little blowfox.

“Ayame!”

“Kuu!”

I caught the jumping fox in my arms.

“Ayame! You’re okay?!”

“Kuu?”

After watching her paddle her legs in the air to get to me, I felt a little bad for raising her up to eye level and inspecting her from the tip of her nose to the end of her tail. She didn’t have any injuries, and she showed no signs of being stressed out. Her cute eyes were simply filled with the joy of reuniting with me. After I confirmed she was okay, I finally hugged her tiny body against mine.

“Good... So nothing happened.”

I felt reassured as Ayame lapped at my cheek.

“Thank goodness, right, Senpai?” Katou said with a smile, still riding on Rose’s back.

I returned her smile. I was relieved from the bottom of my heart.

“Yeah. Now that we’ve reunited, everything is—”

I stopped in the middle of talking and grimaced.

“Master? Is something wrong?” Rose asked curiously.

“Did anyone else find that conversation strange just now?” I asked, turning

toward her.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I can’t really put it into words...”

Something about my conversation with Shiran felt out of place. What was it? I searched my mind for a few seconds, but I couldn’t come up with anything. Perhaps it would’ve been better to just ignore it and assume it was my imagination, but I couldn’t. It was like something was blurring my thoughts, much like this fog was blurring my vision.

Having sensed these feelings through the mental path, Rose watched me place a hand to my head. Then she answered my question with a dignified expression.

“I don’t really understand, but it seems you’re worried about something,” she said, walking up to me with Katou still on her back. “It’ll be all right. Even if I must cast away this body, I will definitely protect you, Master.”

It was a sincere and powerful declaration. Her expression was filled with resolve even as she worried about me.

“Rose...”

I recalled when I first came to the Woodlands. Rose had transformed so much compared to when I first met her, yet there were parts of her that hadn’t changed at all. I relaxed my tense muscles and let out a small sigh. I had to remain calm if I was to give the situation any thought. There was nothing to panic about. I had these reliable girls with me, after all.

“Thank you,” I said.

I came back to my senses, and Rose gave me a beaming smile. I jolted and stared at her for a while.

“Master...?”

Rose blinked, looking utterly confused. She exchanged glances with Katou. I knit my brows once more. It really was just as I’d thought.

“Hey, Rose. Somehow, it seems like...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Aren’t you...cuter than usual today?”

Rose staggered, and Katou screamed.

“Ah?! S-Sorry, Mana.”

Rose had lost her balance and nearly fallen. She immediately hunched forward and thrust her hands against the ground to stabilize herself. The only damage was the dirt on her gloves from touching the damp soil.

“M-Master...?” Rose said in a trembling voice.

“Oh, um, sorry about that.”

I was somewhat shaken myself. Seriously... What was I even saying?

“What are you two doing...?” Shiran asked. She looked astonished as well.

Rose stood back up, and Ayame looked up at me and yipped cutely. Just then, a voice came across the fog.

“My goodness. Running off on her own like that...”

I turned around as a new figure appeared. It was a girl in pure white, her form practically melting into the white mist. Once she spotted us, she burst into the purest of smiles.

“Oooh! My Lord! And everyone else too!”

Her beautiful hair trailed behind her as she ran over to us with a soft pitter patter. Just like Ayame, she didn’t appear to be injured. I sighed in relief, happy to see her familiar figure.

“Thank goodness, you’re safe,” I said.

“Hm? Oh, right. It’s good we’ve reunited safely.”

Gerbera had no idea that we’d been worried about her. She looked at me curiously but then decided it didn’t matter and focused on celebrating our reunion.

“Around ten days, as planned. It honestly felt rather long,” she said.

“I felt the same... Where’s Lily?” I asked.

“She’s waiting for you with the others.”

“I see. That’s good.”

I was genuinely relieved that everyone was confirmed safe.

“Mm. Then let me show you the way. Follow me.”

Gerbera started walking. As she did, Ayame slipped out of my arms and ran ahead of her.

“Ah! Come now, Ayame! Don’t go off on your own!” Gerbera shouted, but Ayame ignored her. The little fox vanished into the fog in an instant. “Good grief...”

Gerbera sighed at Ayame’s childish behavior. It was a pleasant sight. Having been separated from them for a short while, I felt this all the more. After spending the last day worrying about them, this healed my exhausted spirit... Well, it was supposed to. I still felt like something was out of place.

“Hey, Gerbera?”

“Hm?”

Gerbera turned around. Seeing her tall and slender body, I tried to say something but couldn’t.

“No... Never mind.”

One of her elegant brows pricked up, then she smiled.

“Are you tired, My Lord?”

“Yeah, maybe I am...”

I’d been in a hurry ever since yesterday, thinking that something had happened to these girls. Of course I’d be tired. Katou and Kei were fine, so it was pathetic that I was the most exhausted among us. I just hadn’t been able to calm down, so I was more mentally exhausted than I’d expected.

“I see. If that’s the case, then maybe you should take it easy for today,” Gerbera said.

“I’ll do that.”

We couldn't move until Rose constructed a new manamobile, anyway. We needed it to hide Gerbera and the others from human eyes once we were out of the mountains. It was a good idea to use this time to relax.

"Mm. Things turned out just right," Gerbera added cheerfully. "We found a wonderful spot. Lily and the others are waiting there now."

"You mean a cave or something?"

I was used to living in caves from the time we'd spent in the Woodlands. It was more relaxing than sleeping outdoors in the open. However, Gerbera glanced back over her shoulder and shook her head with a smile.

"Not at all," she replied. "It's far better than some shabby cave."

"What do you mean?"

"Look. You should be able to see it now."

I looked ahead of us, spotting a vague shadow off the road. As we got closer, it gradually became more clear. I gasped. There was a two-story wooden building right before me, a sign hanging from its eaves much like some kind of inn.

Chapter 13: Now! Weird!

“An...inn?”

I was lost for words at the unexpected sight. This was the precipitous Kitrus Mountains, off an abandoned road. Traffic was essentially nonexistent. It was also close to the Woodlands, meaning many monsters inhabited the region. Finding an inn here was just so—

“—fortunate, isn’t it?”

I started, coming back to my senses, and turned around. Shiran was speaking with Gerbera, her expression somewhat gentler than usual.

“Since we can’t move,” she continued, “I thought we would have to spend a few days sleeping outdoors. It really is terrific luck to find an inn here.”

“Right? Right?” Gerbera replied excitedly. “With this, you can rest your body in peace, right, My Lord?”

“Y-Yeah... I guess?”

I nodded along as she suddenly turned the conversation toward me. The two of them were making perfect sense. Absolutely perfect sense... An inn was far better for resting both body and mind compared to sleeping outdoors or in a cave. That was obvious. We were fortunate to find one. So fortunate that I’d lost my voice... It felt like something was slipping through my palms, but I seemed to be the only one feeling this mysterious sensation.

“I didn’t notice there was an inn at all when we passed through here,” Katou said.

“Neither did I. What a blunder,” Rose replied.

Now standing on her own two feet, Katou smiled and chatted happily with Rose. Shiran and Kei were also smiling because of our good luck. Gerbera, who had guided us here, grinned cheerfully.

“There’s no need to stand around here. Lily and the others are waiting for us.

Shall we?"

Gerbera urged everyone on and walked forth. This startled me greatly. She was going for the inn's door. The white arachne, Gerbera, was entering an inn as if it were perfectly natural.

"H-Hey! Hang on, Gerbera!"

Gerbera was reaching for the door, but she halted and turned to me curiously.

"Hm? Is something the matter, My Lord?"

"You don't need me to tell you, right?" I replied in astonishment. I couldn't believe her careless and unguarded reaction. "If you enter an inn, the people inside will..."

"Will...what?"

"H-Huh...?"

Seeing Gerbera stare back at me blankly, I lost what I had to say. What was it? It felt terribly important, but I couldn't remember...

"My Lord?" Gerbera said, jogging over to me. Just like when she'd reunited with us, the gentle pitter patter of her footsteps accompanied her. "Is there something wrong with me?"

She came to a stop in front of me. As I'd confirmed before, she was no different from usual. Her face was beautiful, even as she looked at me with concern. She had bloodred eyes. Her voluptuous curves were only just covered by the white clothing draped over her form. Her breasts were astonishing, her exposed arms were nearly transparent, her waist was ever so slender, and beneath that... Beneath that, she had two long and slender legs. If she went into an inn like that...then...what? There wasn't a problem at all.

"Sorry... I must've been thinking of something else," I mumbled.

"My Lord, you truly do seem exhausted," she said with a worried expression, gripping my hand. "In any case, you should get some rest right away. Okay?"

Before I knew it, everyone was looking at me anxiously. My vision suddenly shook. I pinched my brow to try and focus myself.

“Yeah... You’re right... I’ll do that.”

That was all I could say anymore.



I had to confess, I was genuinely in a bad state. I needed to get some rest right away, just as was recommended to me. I stepped inside the inn, leaning against Gerbera. The bell affixed to the door chimed above me. The inside of the building looked old, yet it was clean and tidy.

“Oh dear. Welcome back,” a voice said from behind the reception desk.

It was a young woman. She was short, though not quite as short as Katou, and had a gentle air about her. She covered the womanly curves of her body with loose clothing. Her long golden-brown hair was tied up, hanging down over her shoulder and draping over her shapely breasts. She looked at me with kind and slightly downturned eyes.

“Is this the master you spoke of?” she asked Gerbera.

“Indeed. He’s finally returned.”

“Hee hee. A long-awaited arrival for you, isn’t it?”

After their friendly exchange, Gerbera turned to me.

“My Lord, this is the inn’s proprietress. She manages it all on her own.”

“Good day to you. Welcome to my inn.”

The woman gave me a quick nod. She was rather young to be owning an inn. From what I could tell, she was at most twenty or so years old. From my perspective, as a visitor from another world, she was like a university student. Having said that, twenty was well into adult territory here. Normally, a woman that age would have one or two children. It was unusual for her to be managing an inn all on her own, but not completely out of the question.

“I believe you had rooms available,” Gerbera said. “We’d like rooms for everyone here for a few days as well. There was some sort of procedure to register, correct?”

“Yes, yes, right away,” the woman replied cheerfully. She pulled out the

register and turned a welcoming and warm smile at me. “Now then. Could I ask you to sign here for me, my dear?”

“Sure.”

I signed my name as instructed. I’d learned how to write my name in the local language to avoid problems at times like these. I went on to write everyone else’s names with clumsy pen strokes.

“How many rooms would you like?” the proprietress asked after confirming all of our names. “Excluding Ayame and Berta, four twin rooms should work perfectly. Or would you like a room for yourself?”

“No. Four rooms will be fine,” I answered.

“Certainly. The rooms are right up there on the second floor.”

“Right then, shall we, My Lord? Lily and the others are waiting,” Gerbera said, tugging on my arm. “Those two haven’t seen you in a while. I’m sure they’re impatient to do so.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

I nodded and headed up the staircase with everyone else.

“Please do enjoy this time of dreams,” the proprietress’s voice said from behind us.



“It’s simple, but there’s a good atmosphere to this inn, isn’t there?” Shiran commented as we ascended the staircase.

Like Shiran said, it was a frugal inn without any splendid decorations, but the atmosphere felt awfully relaxing. I was feeling rather off today, so resting in an inn like this seemed like a great idea. In any case, all I had to do for the day was rest. But before that, I wanted to see Lily’s face.

“Oh yeah. How’s Lily doing, Gerbera?”

“Be at ease. You could even say she’s in perfect shape, I suppose?”

“Is that so? That’s good.”

“Do forgive her for not coming out to see you. The moment we heard you had

arrived, Ayame bolted off, so someone had to chase her right away. Still, even if this is an inn, we're in the mountains, where monsters run rampant. We couldn't leave someone who can't fight all alone here, so Lily and Berta decided to stay behind."

"I see."

That made sense, so I casually nodded along. A few seconds later, I realized something was off about what Gerbera had just said.

"Someone who can't fight...?" I muttered.

Was there someone like that in our group? Goosebumps ran down my skin. I'd gone down the mountain with Rose, Katou, Asarina, Shiran, and Kei. Gerbera, Lily, Ayame, and Berta had stayed behind. There was nobody who couldn't fight in the latter group. The numbers didn't even match in the first place.

We arrived at the top of the stairs, and I watched in a daze as Gerbera stretched her hand toward the door. The discomfort I'd been feeling in small trickles came pouring down all at once.

Yeah...I get it now... Earlier, Gerbera had said, "Those two haven't seen you in a while. I'm sure they're impatient to do so." Yet I'd already reunited with both Ayame and Berta. That meant the only other person in the room was Lily.

What's more, the proprietress had said that four twin rooms would fit us perfectly, excluding Ayame and Berta. Without the two of them, my group consisted of me, Lily, Rose, Katou, Gerbera, Shiran, and Kei. That made seven. It didn't make sense to say that four twin rooms would fit us perfectly. There was also no reason to ask if we needed an extra room for myself. Had she counted wrong? That was hard to believe, considering she'd had all the names right in front of her in the register.

Besides, when Gerbera met us outside the inn, she'd said, "Lily is waiting with the others." Ayame had been in my arms at the time, and Berta had been the one to find us. The way she'd put it only made sense if there was one other person waiting for us in the mountains aside from herself, Lily, Ayame, and Berta.

“What are you doing, My Lord?” Gerbera asked. The door was open before I even realized it. “Don’t just stand there. Come on in.”

“R-Right...”

I did as I was told and entered the room, though my steps were unsteady.

“Oh, Master.”

Lily was sitting on one of two beds. When she saw me, she broke into a beautiful smile. Even with the discomfort I felt, relief filled my heart. However, the moment I spotted the other girl sitting next to Lily, that relief shattered into a million pieces.

It was as if there were a mirror there. She had the same flaxen hair as Lily. From the very top of her head to the tips of her toes, she looked just like her. They were like peas in a pod.

“Long time no see, Majima,” the girl said, smiling at me intimately and waving her hand.

“Mizushima...?” I replied hoarsely.



After changing out of my traveling clothes, I lay down to get some rest.

“Are you all right, Master?”

Lily sat on the bed and looked down at me with concern. Across from her, an identical face peered down at me.

“Hmm, maybe he has a fever?” Mizushima said, cocking her head.

It was a weird sensation to have identical faces looking down at me from both sides. It was stranger still that I found this weird. After all, we’d been traveling together all this time. They had the same face, the same hair, the same body... Well, one part of their bodies was different, but Mizushima was really self-conscious about it, so we never mentioned it. In any case, it was odd that I wasn’t used to this scene by now.

“Doesn’t look like a fever,” Mizushima said after putting her hand to my forehead.

The warmth and tenderness pressed against my skin made me feel guilty.

“I’m just feeling a little out of it. No need to worry,” I told her.

How had I forgotten about her? She’d been traveling with us this entire time. I couldn’t believe myself.

“I’m going to take a short nap,” I continued. “Sorry, but could you wake me up when it’s time for dinner?”

Lily and Mizushima exchanged glances.

“Mm, sure thing. Take it easy, Master.”

“Come on, Aya, Berry, let’s go.”

The two of them quickly stood up, and Ayame and Berta followed them out of the room wagging their tails. As I watched them leave, I suddenly took notice of Berta. Back when I saw her for an instant through the fog, I had mistaken her for a normal dog. That only stood to reason. For example—and really, this was just an example—say Berta had a body as large as a bear and had two heads or something; I would definitely have seen that silhouette as a monster and known it was her. There was no way I’d mistake such a figure for a dog. However, that wasn’t how it had happened.

“Woof.”

Berta noticed my gaze and barked. She was a large dog whose breed could be seen anywhere back in our world—a wolfish dog, something like a Siberian husky. *My head hurts...*

“Okay, Master. See you later.”

After everyone left the room, I sighed deeply and stared up at the ceiling.

“What’s this discomfort I’m feeling?” I grumbled to myself.

There was nothing weird going on at all. That was supposed to be the case, but something felt off. The discomfort was certain, but everything else felt vague. It was as if I were still wandering through that mist.

Well, it was probably just my imagination. As proof of that, none of my companions seemed to find the current situation in any way unusual. They

were probably all relaxing in their own rooms by now. I was the only one troubled by this mysterious sensation.

“Aah, dammit.”

It didn’t seem like I could get any sleep, so I sat up.

“Am I the only one feeling like this...?”

My voice sounded frailer than I expected, bringing a bitter smile to my face.

“I’m really mentally exhausted...”

I shook my head. Grumbling wouldn’t do anything about it. I didn’t think I could fall asleep, but I decided to force myself to try. By doing so, I could assuage this exhaustion and get rid of this discomfort.

Just as I convinced myself of this, my left hand throbbed.

“Masss—ssss—ter.”

A creaking voice called out to me. Asarina stretched out of the back of my hand and slithered into sight.

“What’s up, Asarina?”

“Ssster...”

Asarina shook her Venus flytrap-like head. It was like she was trying to bring my attention to something. I was more closely connected to her than any of my other servants. Still, I couldn’t understand what she was trying to say. Asarina knew this as well, better than anyone. That was precisely why—

“Masss—sss—ter! Right! You! Right!”

—she used words to convey it to me.

“Now! Weird! Everyyy—one! Weird!”

“Asarina...”

“Masss—ter!”

I listened in a daze as Asarina cried out. *It wasn’t just me... I’m not the only one who feels weird about this situation!* Apparently, this had been bothering me quite a bit. I could feel joy welling up within me. However, I couldn’t express

it right now.

“Sssster?” Asarina purred, twisting her snakelike body around. “Masss—ter? What? Wrong?”

“Sorry... Give me a little time.”

I listened to Asarina’s strange husky voice, fell back in bed, and groaned. I now knew I wasn’t the only one who felt something was out of place here. I knew because Asarina had told me so. I felt relieved, but also uneasy to an unprecedented level. I tossed and turned over it for a while longer.

Chapter 14: An Impossible Conversation

On the third morning of our sojourn at the inn, I walked out into the backyard. I drew the sword at my waist and began swinging, remembering what Shiran had taught me. I felt like the mana flowing through me had been elevated lately. I didn't really know why, but it wasn't a bad thing.

Not everything about this was good, though. For example, when I reinforced my body with mana, if I couldn't properly control the flow, it would augment my physical strength unevenly, making it difficult to move around. Also, with more strength, the feeling of using a sword changed. This could have a major effect during battle. I had to get used to this sensation so that it wouldn't be a detriment. Of course, I had to get better at swordsmanship too. It was important not to slack off on my daily training.

"All right... I guess that'll do."

I had been swinging my sword in earnest for about twenty minutes. I stopped my training before I exhausted myself. It was rather damp outside, so I'd worked up quite the sweat. I stripped off my top, drew some water from the well behind the inn, and poured it over my head. The cold water sliding down my hot body felt great.

"Phew..."

After repeating this several times, I brushed back my annoying bangs. Thanks to the fog that was still clinging to our surroundings, I couldn't see any of my companions nearby. The reason I'd gone out on my own without calling anyone was because I wanted to clear my head. Humans were simple beings. This was all it took to feel a little better when a constant discomfort prodded at one's mind.

I hadn't solved the problem, but I could at least calm my heart. Since nobody shared my discomfort, I couldn't go to anyone for help. Thus, it was important I take the time to compose myself like this.

“Oh, there you are, my dear. Are you done training?”

I turned around as the proprietress came out of the inn’s back door. She smiled gently as she walked my way. She wasn’t all that much older than me, and I had opened up to her a bit during our stay.

“You’re quite enthusiastic about that,” she said.

“Yeah. You can get caught up in all kinds of violent affairs when out on a journey.”

“It was amazing. Like, *swoosh! Whoosh!*”

She had come out to tend the garden behind the inn while I was training earlier. That was when she’d witnessed my swordplay. She imitated me, swinging her arms through the air. She had such a calm demeanor about her, but at times like these, she was unexpectedly childish. She wasn’t all that athletic, so it looked more like some bizarre dance, which was perhaps what emphasized her childish behavior.

“Excuse me...” she said bashfully, stopping her arms. “Oh right, I forgot what I came out for. Breakfast is ready. What will you do?”

“Just as always, I’ll take it with everyone else. I’ll go get them, so could you wait a little?”

“Certainly,” she said, nodding with a bright smile.

“Oh yeah, it looked like you were deep in thought earlier. Is something wrong?”

I was talking about when she came out to tend the garden. Even when I swung my sword, I made sure to keep a keen eye on my surroundings. I’d been fairly aware of her movements at the time.

“Oh dear. You saw me? How embarrassing.” The proprietress put a hand to her cheek and smiled bashfully. “How should I put it? I was just thinking of how things weren’t really going my way. Things have gone a little beyond my expectations, so I was wondering what to do about it.”

“If something is troubling you, then would you like my help?”

“Thank you, but I’ll be fine. What will be will be,” she said somewhat

philosophically. “Okay then, please call me when you are ready.”

With that, she went back inside the inn.

“What will be will be...” I quietly muttered to myself.

It would be nice if that was all it took to settle things, but in my case, I had my companions to consider. I couldn’t just go with the flow.

“Masss—ter. What? Do?”

Asarina slithered out of the back of my hand. She was the only one who shared my discomfort.

“Hmm...”

I believed we were currently under the effects of some sort of glamor or the like. The problem was that even though I knew something was strange, I couldn’t tell what. Something was weird, but I didn’t find it weird. I couldn’t identify what was causing the contradiction. That was probably how this spell worked.

For some reason, only Asarina and I could sense something was a little off. I had of course consulted my other companions on the very first day about the discomfort the two of us felt. I had told them to keep on guard, and they had all nodded back in confusion. That was the bare minimum we had to accomplish.

Lacking a sense of danger could be a major problem. That applied doubly so when we had no idea what to be on guard against. I had no choice but to keep a sharp eye on the situation and watch over everyone.

“For now, let’s go check on them,” I said.

It was worrisome that we were the only ones who could sense this abnormality, but it also meant that the two of us could prepare ourselves for the situation. The “enemy” who’d cast this glamor wouldn’t expect it. We had to make good use of that.



After everyone had finished breakfast, I stepped outside the inn with Katou. There, we found Rose processing a mound of lumber she’d cut down and brought here. Next to her was a mostly finished wagon. I felt something was

slightly off seeing Rose out in the open with her gloves off. I shook my head. What was odd about that? As always, I couldn't tell.

"Master. Have you finished your meal?"

Seeing us coming, Rose looked up and smiled at us. She had been in a great mood lately. It wasn't like she always went about with a sullen expression or anything, but I could easily see that she was in high spirits. This naturally brought a smile to my face as well.

"How goes the progress on the manamobile?" I asked.

"Same as yesterday—it's going smoothly. I should be done tomorrow."

Rose dove into more details. She'd gotten the frame to a state where she could do a test run, and she'd already confirmed that it could move using the runestone from Diospyro. This meant we could leave tomorrow.

Still, that wasn't much of a relief. So long as I had no idea what this abnormality was, there was no guarantee that leaving would resolve anything. It was possible nothing would change, but it was also possible it would get worse. As a matter of fact, we should probably be even more careful.

As I steeled my resolve, the inn's door opened behind me.

"Huh? Lily? Is something wrong?" Katou asked curiously while she used a broom to diligently sweep up the shavings from Rose's work.

Lily came out of the inn and looked around restlessly, then asked, "Hey, have you seen Miho?"

"Mizushima? No, I haven't," I replied.

Katou and Rose also shook their heads. Lily looked troubled by this.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Hmm. I wanted to talk to her about something, but I haven't been able to catch her."

"What about?"

"It's just, considering our future, I thought it'd be nice for Miho to use mimicry to come outside every now and then. I wanted to convince her to," Lily

said, folding her arms under her bountiful breasts. “Miho seems satisfied with the current situation, saying that’d be cheating. She doesn’t really seem to want to... But I still think she should come outside every now and then.”

“Well, shut-ins can be troublesome,” I said nonchalantly. “Is that even possible?”

“It is. She can do it right now if it’s just for a short time. In truth, the partial mimicry I activated using Miho’s disposition as a visitor is only feasible if I leave some of the control over all the mimicry to her.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm. At this rate, she should get used to mimicry all on her own some day. If so, she can come outside...” Lily paused and slumped. “But it’s no good if she has no motivation to, right? At the very least, I think it’d be fine if she let everyone else know that she’s here.”

“You have a point there.”

As I nodded along, I put my hand to my temple. I had a slight headache. There was probably something peculiar about this conversation. I couldn’t tell what, though. Maybe the entire topic itself was strange.

“Miho has helped me a ton and all,” Lily continued. She didn’t feel anything out of place like I did. “I want to pay her back, even if only a little. Or am I just being a bother?”

“I don’t think you are,” Katou said. “Mizushima-senpai is actually really lazy sometimes.”

“Really?”

“Yup. She’s only really proactive about things that stimulate her curiosity. Back in our world, she read a ton of books and was really passionate about club activities. When she’s not interested, though, she becomes really sluggish. I wouldn’t quite say she’s a hedonist, but she’s kind of childish in that respect. A good spanking would do her well.”

“Somehow...that really resonates.”

“I mean, I got along with her very well.”

“Oh yeah, I guess that’s true... Hmm, yup, you did. I have memories of you taking care of her.”

Lily touched her head with both hands and looked around at the sky. It seemed she was searching her memories. As she did, her smile turned pleasing yet sarcastic.

“Hee hee. I think I understand why you’re so good at taking care of Rose now.”

“Rose is a little different from her, but in the sense that it feels rewarding to take care of them, they might be similar.”

The two of them looked at Rose as she cocked her head. Katou smiled warmly, then turned back to Lily.

“If you push too hard, she’ll run away, so you need to choose the right opportunity.”

“Hmm. You’ve got a point there. Okay, I’ll do that.”

Lily gave up on chasing Mizushima and started a strategy meeting with Katou. After calling out to them, I decided to return to my room.



“Oh, Majima. Welcome back.”

“What the...?”

When I returned to my room, Mizushima greeted me with a smile. She had brought in a small table, where one of the books we’d bought in Diospyro was splayed open. I pinched my brow, but not because of the discomfort I’d been feeling lately.

“Mizushima, what are you doing here?”

This was the room Gerbera and I slept in. Mizushima shared a room with Lily two doors over.

“Gerbera let me in. Oh, she said she went to go pick plants with the inn’s proprietress. Sounds like dinner will be pretty good, huh?”

“That’s not what I’m asking...”

“Aw, come on. Isn’t it fine?”

Mizushima gave me a friendly smile, and I narrowed my eyes.

“Mizushima... Did you come here to run away from Lily?”

“Ugh... I-It’s got nothing to do with Lilz, okay?” she answered, her eyes wandering across the room.

“Your voice is awfully shrill considering that,” I said with a sigh.

“Erk.”

Mizushima put her head on the table and stretched out her legs. When she did, her skirt got caught. Her healthy thighs came into view. They really looked alike, but she wasn’t Lily. It was rude for me to stare too much at my defenseless classmate, so I averted my eyes as naturally as possible. Mizushima kept her head on the table and swiveled to look at me.



“You were just thinking how this posture isn’t squishing my tits, weren’t you?”

“I wasn’t.”

That hadn’t been my intent. I was simply trying not to stare. Not that Mizushima believed me.

“Whatever. Lilz is different, anyway. You sure do love big tits.”

“That’s a misunderstanding. I don’t really like them big or anything...”

“Oh, I guess not. Lilz can make hers small too, so you can enjoy a variety. Even when small, they’re enough to—”

“Please stop.”

“Oh, but things have been looking good with Gerbera lately, and hers are about as big as Lilz’s. Meaning you really do—”

“Do you want to dodge the topic that badly?”

Mizushima looked the other way and pouted. I’d hit the bull’s-eye. I forced a smile and sat down on my bed. Ayame and Berta were curled up on Gerbera’s bed. Perhaps they’d gotten sleepy after eating their fill. I was a little drowsy myself and let out a yawn.

“What’s Lilz up to?” Mizushima asked.

“She’s with Rose and Katou.”

“Is she angry...?”

“Not at all.”

“That so...?” Mizushima sighed in relief.

“Lily doesn’t have any ill intent or anything. Don’t hate her for it,” I said.

“I know that. It’s okay.” Mizushima remained prostrated over the table and waved a hand about. “I’m happy she’s being considerate of me. I get what she’s saying and all. It’s just...”

“What?”

“I’d like some more time,” she grumbled dejectedly.

“Is there a problem?” I asked, finding her reaction a little curious.

It wasn't that she disliked broaching the topic entirely, but judging by how she'd seriously tried to dodge it earlier, it certainly troubled her. I gave her a dubious glance, and after pouting a bit more, Mizushima gave in.

“Lilz and I share a fair portion of our memories. Did you know that?”

“I know Lily has your memories. It goes the other way?”

“Yup, it does. There's a bit of a difference, though.”

“How so?”

“I mean, Lilz gained my memories by eating me, but she didn't really experience my life for herself, right? But in my case, I have her memories 'cause I'm inside her and share her body.”

Mizushima twiddled her finger over the tabletop as she continued her explanation.

“Lilz only retains my memories as knowledge, nothing more. In contrast, I feel all her experiences. Well, I guess that's obvious, since I share her body and experience everything that's happening.”

“Is there a problem with that?”

Mizushima took some time to formulate her words, then started staring at the grain of the tabletop.

“Watching the boy whom I thought was a little nice trying his best from a front-row seat is, you know, ummm, kinda stimulating?”

Her cheeks turned a little red.

“Well, Lilz was the one watching, but...I'm always there too... So, I mean, what I'm trying to say is...” Mizushima paused and cradled her head. “I haven't even confessed to the boy I ended up liking, and we're not even dating, but I have all these memories of sweet flirting, and passionate whispering, and even sleeping with him. How am I supposed to look at him?”

This was the hardest question I'd ever had to answer. Actually, what was I supposed to say in this situation? This wasn't something anybody normally

experienced.

“Aagh.” Mizushima continued fretting about it for a while, and then her eyes snapped open. “Well, I guess it’ll only trouble you to tell you this stuff, Majima.”

She pulled herself back together, sat back up, and looked at my face. Then she blinked in surprise.

“Huh...? Majima?”

“Yes?”

“You’re Majima, right?”

“Of course I am. Who did you think you were talking to?”

“Oh, um. Right.” Mizushima nodded several times. “How weird. I feel like I said something really shocking just now...”

I couldn’t really say it, but I felt the same. I didn’t know what was shocking about it, though. I couldn’t recognize the inconsistency. Was there even an inconsistency to begin with? Or was the fact that Mizushima was here telling me this inconceivable in the first place?

“Just my imagination?” Mizushima wondered, cocking her head. Then she decided the unanswerable question could be dropped. “Oh. Sorry, Majima. It’s like I’m the only one talking here.” She covered her mouth, then raised a brow awkwardly. “It seems my senses are influenced by Lilz sometimes. Now that I think about it, I’m acting all defenseless here...”

She finally showed some concern for the state of her skirt. I pretended not to notice.

“I don’t really mind,” I said.

“But it troubles you, doesn’t it? And yet, I take advantage of you like this. Sorry.”

After a moment of silence, Mizushima guessed why I was loitering around the inn.

“You came to check on us, right?” she said, slowly inclining her head to the side. “Feeling like something’s out of place, was it? I can’t feel it at all, so I’ve

got no idea. If that's true, then who's doing it, and what for?"

"Who...? And what for...?"

I grimaced.

Seeing this, Mizushima waved her hands about. "Oh, sorry. I was just speaking my mind. I might've said something irresponsible..."

"It's fine. I'm grateful to have a different perspective."

Trying to resolve a problem on my own always seemed to come with a monotonous train of thought. I was so focused on trying to find out what was weird and what I should do that I hadn't even thought of that.

"Maybe I should give that some consideration. Thanks, Mizushima. You're a great help."

"R-Really...? I've only been babbling all this time. I'm happy to be of use at least..."

Mizushima fiddled with her flaxen bangs and averted her eyes. She was clearly embarrassed.

"Okay then," she said, "letting you humor me any more than this will really make me feel like I'm being a nuisance, so I think I'm gonna go get some air outside."

Mizushima bounced up from her seat. Her shoes hit the ground, waking up Ayame and Berta. I'd asked the two of them to stay by Mizushima or Katou as much as possible. Having remembered this, they walked out into the hallway when Mizushima opened the door.

"Oh yeah. If I let this opportunity pass, I don't know when the next chance will come," she said, turning around right before leaving the room. "It's because of you that I'm here now, even though it was all supposed to end for me back then. Thank you, Majima."

With that, she gave me a radiant smile that seemed like a miracle of its own.

Chapter 15: An Impossible Sight

“Who cast this glamor, and what for...?”

I gazed at the door after Mizushima left, quietly muttering to myself.

“What do you think, Asarina?”

“No? Know?”

“Right...”

I slumped as Asarina peered up at me from my hand. I wouldn't be having such a hard time if it were easy to find the answer. I sighed and poked Asarina. With each poke, her entire body rippled like a wave. Was she having fun? I sure was.

“No, this isn't the time to be escaping reality...”

“Ssster?”

“Now that I think of it, who...or I guess, what kind of being, cast this glamor is a pretty important question.”

I realized something after hearing Mizushima's question.

“Even Gerbera got caught in this spell. What kind of outrageous being could this 'enemy' be...?”

The Great White Spider hadn't reigned over the Depths for show. Previously, the queen monster Anton's glamor hadn't affected her at all. Maybe it would be possible if another high monster like her were casting it.

But would Gerbera truly not notice that she was under attack? She had survived for a long time in the Woodlands. She was outstanding at sensing danger, and she was very sensitive to hostility. Could even a cheater cast a glamor on her without her noticing it?

Nonetheless, the reality was that Gerbera had been caught in this attack. It was a mystery, but seeing how it had indeed happened, perhaps it was right to

assume that our “enemy” was that level of being.

It seemed we were in a pretty bad situation. Our only stroke of luck here was that our “enemy” had, so far, only cast this glamor. They showed no signs of trying to harm us.

Giving it some more thought, this was also a mystery. If we were under some kind of glamor, wouldn’t they attack right away? Because they’d left us unharmed, I found myself in this strange stalemate. Still, it wasn’t definite whether this would go on forever either. So long as I didn’t know the purpose behind this glamor, there was no guarantee that we would be all right just because we were safe now.

“In any case, it really is irritating that my only choice is to constantly keep on guard.”

“Masss—ter?”

Just as I bit down on my lip, Asarina wrapped herself around my arm.

“What’s up, Asarina?” I asked, lowering my gaze to my green partner.

“Everyyy—one. Danger. Know. No?”

Asarina did her best to string some words together. However, I couldn’t understand what she was trying to say.

“Umm, what do you mean?”

“Danger! Everyyy—one! Know!”

She repeated her words with her creaky voice. I still couldn’t really understand.

“No, I don’t think they noticed?”

“No... Everyyy—one... Know...”

“Really?”

“Ssster...”

Asarina went dejectedly limp. Evidently, I was wrong. It was difficult to understand her. Just because she could talk, it didn’t mean her intentions got across. I scratched my head in confusion as Asarina’s head jolted back up. I

watched her, wondering what was going on, when she stretched out toward the open window.

“Is there something outside?”

“Ssster!”

It seemed there was. I followed Asarina and walked up to the window. I looked outside and saw Shiran and Kei. They had wooden swords and shields in hand, made to imitate a knight’s equipment. Shiran was apparently in the middle of training Kei. Judging by how Kei was drenched in sweat, they’d been going at it for a while.

Shiran’s skin was only slightly sweaty. She had a lot more energy to spare. Her two blue eyes shone with the calm air of a mentor as she watched Kei’s every movement... Another headache hit me. Something here was strange. In all likelihood, it had to do with Shiran. I was starting to get used to this discomfort, so all I had to do to get by now was knit my brows a little. As I did, the sound of wooden swords clashing resounded from below.

“You’re not stepping in enough.”

“R-Right!”

Shiran calmly caught Kei’s intense swings with her wooden shield and pointed out any faults. After repeating this several times, Shiran went on the offensive. Kei desperately tried to fend her off. Sometimes her shield made it in time. Sometimes it didn’t, and Shiran would stop right before hitting her. Shiran was swinging just fast enough to push Kei to the very limits of her reaction speed.

“She really is amazing...”

It had been a while since I last saw Shiran wield her sword. Lately, she hadn’t been doing so. I felt like there was a reason for this, but I couldn’t remember what it was. Only one word came to mind after witnessing her swordplay for the first time in a while—beautiful.

I had thought the same thing when I first saw her training in Fort Tilia. It was completely captivating. Time passed as I remained bewitched by her sword. In the end, Kei took a thrust to her chest protector and fell over. That was it for her training.

“Let’s stop there for today,” Shiran said, her breathing only slightly rough.

Kei lay spread-eagled on the ground, answering through ragged breaths.

“Th-Thank...you...very...much...”

“You hung in there well,” Shiran said gently, a complete contrast to her strictness during training.

Shiran brought Kei a water canteen and a cloth to wipe herself off. After Kei got her breathing back in order, she slowly and unsteadily sat up. She accepted the canteen from Shiran and took a drink.

“Pwaaah... Shiran, could I ask you to train me a little more?”

“You shouldn’t force yourself,” Shiran told her with a slightly admonishing tone.

“But Takahiro persists until his very limits,” Kei grumbled, a sullen look on her face.

“Takahiro has a wonderful attitude, and your intent to try harder after seeing him is worthy of praise. However, you’re still growing. If you push yourself too hard, it could negatively influence your heart and body. There’s no need to act older than you are, you know?”

“Th-That’s not true. You’re lying. I heard you trained like crazy when you were my age, and you’re nice and tall and beautiful.”

“How do you know that...? Aah, did one of the older knights tell you? I’m guessing it was Marcus. Seriously, that man...” Shiran said with a sigh.

“I just want to be the same as you,” Kei complained somewhat peevishly while sounding a bit spoiled at the same time.

“You shouldn’t strive to be the same as me, Kei,” Shiran replied with a bitter smile.

“But...”

“You ought to be a stronger knight than me, in the truest sense.”

Shiran held out her hand to Kei. Even as Kei pouted, she obediently reached out, but their hands didn’t meet.

“Shiran?”

Shiran had unnaturally stiffened in the middle of reaching out for Kei’s hand.

“Sorry...it’s nothing.”

She shook her head and stretched out once more. Kei took it this time, a curious look still in her eyes. Shiran frivolously lifted her niece back up to her feet and embraced her.

“Shiran?”

“Kei, you will...” Shiran started in a kind tone. “You will one day become a splendid knight. The Third Company is gone, but Aker’s Order of National Defense still stands. There are many paths to becoming a knight. Once the commander returns from the Empire, let’s discuss this, shall we?”

I could only see Shiran’s back from my position. I had no idea what kind of expression she was making. I could only feel the gentle atmosphere wrapped around them.

“Really? Do you really think I can become an amazing knight like you?” Kei asked in a trembling voice.

Shiran brushed Kei’s head awkwardly, then said, “Yes. You are my brother’s daughter...my prided niece.”

“Shiran!” Kei shouted, clinging hard to Shiran’s body. “I’m so happy! But why all of a sudden?”

“I wonder? For some reason, I believed I couldn’t let this opportunity pass.”



They looked so happy. I felt a little bad watching them secretly like this, so I backed away from the window. The warmth of the sight I'd witnessed was accompanied by a slight pang in my heart from peeking on them. I let out a sigh, and a beat later, I realized something.

"Oh. This is clearly strange."

"Ssster?"

That just now was definitely unimaginable. Not Shiran hugging Kei, of course. No, maybe that was a little unusual too, but at the very least, that wasn't what I'd realized.

"There's no way Shiran wouldn't have noticed I was watching."

Shiran had contracted spirits. I'd learned on the very first day I met her that it was impossible to peek on her. This was abnormal, but it wasn't the truly weird thing here.

"Why is this the one time I know for sure that something is off?"

Even if I realized something was out of place, I'd never been able to identify what it was. But this time, I knew what I'd found strange. In other words, this instance was an irregularity. Something was different here. I didn't know what, but one phrase repeated in my mind.

"What for? And who?"

Because the spirits' senses weren't working properly, I'd been able to peep on Shiran and Kei. If this "enemy's" objective was still being fulfilled...maybe it meant they *wanted* me to see that? They wanted me to watch Shiran and Kei being happy?

"But why...?"

I tried diving deeper into thought, but I wasn't allowed to.

"My Lord!"

In the next instant, the door to my room slammed open.

Chapter 16: An Impossible Embrace

The door to my room flew open with enough vigor that I thought the hinges would break. I went on guard against the shocking sound.

Without heeding my reaction, Gerbera entered the room, her pure-white hair fluttering behind her.

Something was wrong. Her practically transparent cheeks were now bright red, and her breathing was rough. I could tell at a single glance that she was in an excited state. It was honestly a little scary.

“Wh-What’s up, Gerbera? I thought you went out to gather herbs...”

“My Lord, I heard from Rose. Is it true we’ll be able to depart tomorrow?” she asked, ignoring my question entirely.

No, rather than ignoring it, it was more like she was too panicked to answer. This was fairly common for her. Huh...? In that case, it wasn’t all that strange.

After thinking about it, I calmed down a little. From what I could see, she hadn’t burst into the room because of some impending danger. Judging by the situation, she had returned from gathering herbs, asked Rose about her progress, and then made her way here. Not that I knew what had her in such a rush, though.

“It’s true, we’ll be leaving tomorrow,” I replied.

“I see...”

Gerbera pursed her lips and frowned. Was there some sort of problem with leaving tomorrow? With that question in mind, I watched as she turned around and closed the door—then bolted it shut.

“Uhh, hang on. Why are you locking the door?”

Gerbera turned back around without answering me. Just as before, she seemed panicked. Next, she shifted her focus to Asarina, who was looking curiously back and forth between us.

“Asarina,” she said, “could I have some time alone with our lord? I’d like to speak with him for a bit.”

No sooner than she asked, Gerbera walked toward me. I didn’t really get it, but she was startlingly vigorous. Asarina backed down, overawed by her behavior, and I reflexively took a step back myself.

“Hey, Gerbera? You okay? You’re acting weird.”

“Is that so? I haven’t slept the past two days. I might be acting a little off. Forgive me.”

She hadn’t slept? Gerbera had been using the bed next to mine.

“I’ve been all alone in this room with you, My Lord. How could I possibly sleep?”

This stunned me into silence. I knew what she’d meant, but there was something a little off when she spoke of it so proudly.

“I’d rather you praise me for my self-restraint in not pouncing on you,” she added.

“I think it’s usually the other way around?”

I stiffly drew back as Gerbera steadily closed in. The room was small, though. I couldn’t keep it up forever.

“My Lord...”

Once she got within reach, she looked up at me with her red eyes. It was like they were sparkling. Anxiety started filling my heart as I thought of a certain possibility. We were under attack by an “enemy’s” unidentifiable glamor. Up until now, they’d shown no signs of wanting to hurt us, but their objective remained unknown. As such, we didn’t know how long that would last. After all, it wasn’t certain how much of an effect this glamor could have on my servants. If, by some chance, Gerbera was deceived and lured to the “enemy’s” side...

The moment that thought came to mind, she took action.

“My Lord!”

I couldn’t react. Gerbera leaped into my chest with the agile movements of a

beast. She stretched out her arms and wrapped them around my torso like snakes. She was too fast, and I had no time to brush her off. I had no means of resisting. Gerbera put all her strength into her arms and squeezed. Her voluptuous breasts pushed against me, and she hugged me close.

“Huh...?”

My mind couldn't keep up. I could only tell that this wasn't a hostile attack. On the contrary, there was deep affection in this display. Gerbera's soft skin pressed against me. She stirred slightly, still embracing me as if to savor every last part of my being. Her breasts squished against my chest, their presence clear in my mind. My clothes were a poor barrier against the soft feeling and the sweet urges born from it. Gerbera pressed her nose to my collarbone and took in a deep breath.

“Haah...”

Her satisfied sigh soaked into my chest. I could feel the heat from her burning passion and her overflowing love. That heat shattered my last restraints. My body moved to return Gerbera's embrace on reflex, but before I could, she leaped away from me.

“Huh...?”

I was dumbfounded, my arms outstretched with nowhere to go, much like the impulse surging out of my heart. Gerbera was already out of reach. I felt like I had just gotten tricked by a wily fox.

“Mm. All's good now,” Gerbera said, nodding deeply.

Apparently, she was completely satisfied. My face was probably pretty pathetic at this point.

“What was that...?” I asked.

For the time being, it didn't look like Gerbera had been beguiled by the “enemy” like I'd feared. That was a relief, but I couldn't understand the meaning behind her sudden embrace. She had come in so quickly, and she'd squeezed with all her strength...

All her strength? Gerbera? On me? Something was out of place. Once more,

there was something strange about this, but I couldn't tell what. There was only one thing that remained perfectly undeniable. Something about this situation was definitely weird...but as a result, Gerbera was now smiling with satisfaction.

"I wonder why? I thought I'd be able to do it now," Gerbera said, squeezing her arms around herself. It was like she was reflecting deeply on the sensation from that brief embrace. "But any more than this would be no good. Reaching the final stage is something I must attain through my own efforts. That's why this is enough for today."

I couldn't understand what she was saying. It also looked like she really didn't know what she was saying herself. Still, she looked so satisfied. Seeing her like that, I couldn't help but smile wryly.

It felt like we were being toyed with, but I didn't care now. I was just satisfied to see Gerbera's content smile. I wondered why that was, and as I did, I recalled Rose's terrific mood, Mizushima's radiant smile, and Shiran and Kei's happy figures.

"Oh..."

I was astonished. At that moment, I finally arrived at the truth of the matter.



Late at night, when everyone was fast asleep, I slipped out of bed. Gerbera was lying down in the bed next to mine. Perhaps because she was lacking sleep, or because she'd gotten too excited during the day, she was resting well now. I listened to the sound of her breathing as I left the room, and then I descended to the first floor.

The floorboards creaked in the stillness of the night. Many of my companions had sharp senses. Normally, someone would've noticed if I snuck out like this, but nobody did. I wasn't surprised. I knew just by the fact that the spirits could be tricked that my poor sneaking skills would suffice.

"Good evening, my dear."

When I got to the bottom of the staircase, I found the proprietress waiting for me at the reception desk. Her features gave her a gentle air, and her smile was calm and sweet.

“You have something to speak with me about, right?” she said. “Shall we talk further within?”

I nodded, and she guided me to another room on the first floor. She told me to wait at the table inside, then left the room. Several minutes later, she brought two servings of tea on a tray.

“Is this okay?” she asked. “Coming on your own, I mean. Are you not a little anxious?”

“I trust you enough for this. Besides...if something does happen, Gerbera or the others will sense it right away and come charging in.”

“Well, you have a point there,” she conceded, making no attempt to refute my claim. She just chuckled and took a seat across from me.

Now then, where was I to start? She didn’t seem to have any intention of rushing me. She simply looked my way with a gentle expression. I took a sip of the hot tea and then cut to the chase.

“For the last few days, I’ve been feeling that something wasn’t right. It seems there’s an ‘enemy’ out there who attacked us with some kind of glamor magic. The only ones who felt something was off about the current situation were myself and Asarina.”

“Ssster.”

The proprietress gazed at me, then at Asarina, looking a little troubled. Well, I could imagine what she was feeling. It wasn’t that I was capable of sensing something out of place, but rather that I just kind of ended up sensing it anyway. I swallowed my urge to smile bitterly and continued.

“There were two mysteries,” I explained. “First, Gerbera is here. She’s lived for many years in the Depths of the Woodlands. She’s a legend among monsters. A monster of the same level might be able to cast a glamor on her, but she’s sensitive to hostility. I doubt she wouldn’t notice an attack.”

“And what would the other mystery be?” she asked.

“After they trapped us in this glamor, the ‘enemy’ never harmed us,” I answered, twirling the hot cup in between my hands. “It’s pointless to attack

using only a glamor. There has to be some kind of physical attack on the weakened targets to accomplish anything. Yet, this ‘enemy’ didn’t do a thing for three days, despite the increasing possibility that the glamor could come undone the longer this went on. I couldn’t understand why they cast this glamor on us...”

I could no longer hold back a begrudging smile.

“Well...I suppose you wouldn’t. Your entire premise was wrong,” she said.

Who? And what for? I’d misunderstood the situation from the start.

“It wasn’t an attack,” I said. “Of course we didn’t come to any harm. It didn’t matter how sensitive Gerbera was to hostility. Our ‘enemy’ wasn’t an enemy to begin with.”

Going as far as tricking the spirits so that I could see Shiran and Kei so happy was a message from the non-enemy telling me that they had no hostile intent. Also, Asarina had tried to tell me something else.

“Danger. Everyyy—one. Know. No?”

If we’d truly been in danger, everyone would’ve noticed, right? That was what she’d tried to say. The fact that Gerbera hadn’t noticed anything amiss proved that our current situation wasn’t dangerous.

“In that case, what was the purpose of all this?” I asked, lowering my eyes to my cup.

I saw images of my companions’ faces in the pale-red water as they’d been for the last few days. All of them looked so relaxed, or like they were having so much fun... I’d been the only one on edge and on guard.

“In truth,” I continued, “we were all supposed to ‘enjoy this time of dreams’ during our stay. But because I didn’t get fully caught in the glamor, it got all messed up.”

Having said that, from my point of view, nothing could really be done about that. For example, what would happen if someone ended up in their dreams while still awake? The world would be illogical and ominous, making it impossible to have fun, right? My situation was something akin to that. In other

words, it was an unfortunate coincidence—unfortunate for me, because I’d worried the entire time, and unfortunate for the one who’d provided us with this delightful dream.

“I remember now,” I said. “One of my companions told me before about a strange tale involving a certain traveler. The name of the play based on the story is *The Misty Lodge*.”

I looked up and met the gaze of the woman in front of me before continuing.

“Once upon a time, a traveler was attacked by a monster. Being accustomed to danger, he managed to escape, but he lost all of his provisions and water. There were no settlements nearby, so he was destined to die by the roadside. The traveler continued walking in desperation, dizzy from starvation and exhaustion. After several days, a mist began to fill the area. And the moment he thought everything was over, he finally found an inn.”

I paused to wet my tongue with a sip of tea.

“The traveler thanked the heavens for his terrific luck. He was courteously welcomed into the inn and spared from his grisly fate. However, when he left the inn the next day, he noticed something odd. There was no way an inn would be in the middle of nowhere like that. By the time he realized this, there wasn’t a single trace of the inn left...”

That was the end of the story. There was, in fact, a lot more in the middle, but I left that out and kept things to a basic summary. Up until very recently, I’d completely forgotten about this tale. Even Shiran, who’d told me about it, didn’t seem to remember. Something had likely made us forget, seeing as that knowledge would have made it difficult to establish this situation. The fact that I could remember now was proof that the glamor was coming undone, or perhaps this room was special.

“It seems this tale has been passed on for a long time in many places. Of course, the witness changes to a farmer or a hunter here and there. The one common point is that they all reached an inn while walking through a thick mist, and during their stay, not a single one found anything out of the ordinary about the clearly strange situation.”

Far too many details of this story coincided with the phenomenon we were

currently experiencing. It couldn't possibly be a coincidence, especially considering we'd conveniently forgotten about this very story.

"The interesting thing is that, for a very long time, witness accounts of the Misty Lodge have popped up every few decades. It couldn't possibly be the work of humans. It couldn't be monsters either. They would never save people, after all... That's common sense in this world, right?"

I paused to check her reaction. The woman smiled back at me. Her smile was gentle, but I couldn't see what hid behind it. I felt like I was being graded as I continued.

"I have the power to grant hearts to monsters. But all it really amounts to is helping those who already have the foundation for a heart to grow from. The Great White Spider Gerbera, who has lived for many years, already had something like a heart before we met. There's also the precedent established in *The Tragedy of the Undead King Carl* about the undead monster who ruled over an entire country. It's more than feasible for a monster to have a heart without my presence."

All my ability did was stimulate the growth of a heart that was already there. It did speed up the process, but given enough time, it would have happened regardless. It was just simple logic.

"Up until now, I thought such beings only existed within the Depths, the Abyss, or the Dark Woods. But that isn't necessarily the case. I was careless. Not all monsters settle in one place."

I had witnessed one such example myself. There were monsters who swam through the air as if it were a great ocean—tripdrills. They formed massive schools and moved across the continent with the seasons. Migratory monsters did exist in this world.

"From all that, I came up with a theory," I said, putting my cup down on the table and facing the woman before me. "The one who saved the travelers in the tales of *The Misty Lodge* is a migratory monster who uses mist as a medium to cast a glamor. In short, that's you."

The proprietress's smile deepened as she listened to me.

“Could I correct you on two points?” she said, seemingly enjoying herself. “I don’t cast a glamor using mist. The glamor is but a portion of my magic.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that this inn isn’t just an illusion. The most powerful glamor magic can rewrite reality.”

“Rewrite...reality?”

“You could say I create another dimension. Everything here is reality. My magic creates a separate world of mist.”

“Another dimension...”

I gulped, recalling the taste of tea in my mouth. Now that I thought about it, the traveler in *The Misty Lodge* staved off starvation by staying at the inn. Illusions couldn’t fill one’s belly. But if this was another reality, it explained how the traveler had been saved. But that was way too...

“I feel like you’re saying something really outrageous...” I said.

“Not really,” she replied with a shake of the head. “The world I create is brittle. In truth, if someone like Gerbera were to go wild, it would shatter in an instant.”

Nevertheless, she was creating a whole other dimension, even if only temporarily. It was definitely a dreadful ability. I’d been somewhat jokingly under the impression that a fox or a tanuki or something was tricking us...

“What on earth are you?” I asked, finding it difficult to mask the tension in my voice.

I waited for her answer with bated breath. In contrast, the woman interlaced her fingers over the cup in front of her, maintaining her gentle smile the entire time.

“Are you aware of what monsters are, my dear?”

“Huh? That’s a little sudden. Creatures who possess mana...right?”

The woman shook her head. “That definition isn’t strictly correct. As long as they have mana, even a wooden puppet or a corpse can move. They don’t need

to be living creatures. No. Not only that. In essence, they don't need to have physical substance..."

Right then, the woman sitting in front of me disappeared. Her gentle smile, her golden-brown hair, her petite body... Everything vanished without a trace, though I hadn't even blinked.

"Wha—?!"

"Physical substance doesn't matter. A monster's true nature *is* mana."

I heard a voice coming from nowhere. I wasn't being bewitched by glamor magic, though. I could feel her presence in the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and in each and every piece of furniture in the room. She was making me understand, whether I wanted to or not.

"I see..." I muttered. "So the Misty Lodge in the tales isn't something a monster created using glamor magic. This entire dimension created through magic is actually..."

"Yes. Exactly." Before I knew it, the woman appeared once more and nodded with a smile. "I am the Misty Lodge itself. I am the monster who wanders this world for eternity. I am the very magic that creates this world of mist."

Chapter 17: Someone Who Knows the Past

Feeling a little parched, I reached out for my teacup and gulped its contents in one go. The tea had gotten tepid while we were talking, but it was more than enough to settle my emotions.

“Sorry,” I said, placing the empty cup back on the table.

“Oh?” The Misty Lodge’s downturned eyes widened. “I didn’t think you would apologize,” she said, brushing the bundle of golden-brown hair hanging over her chest. “I kind of thought you’d complain.”

“Complain? What about?”

“The experience was rather unpleasant for you, wasn’t it?”

“Aah...” I nodded at that, then shook my head. “I won’t deny it, but my companions thoroughly relished their stay. I have no intention of criticizing you.”

“I see... It’s because you have such a personality that you didn’t change at all,” the Misty Lodge said, putting a hand to her chest.

“Didn’t change? What do you mean?”

“Just as I said before, the Misty Lodge is magic that creates another dimension. It has the power to rewrite reality.”

She started explaining while raising one finger at a time. She really did look like she was enjoying herself. Perhaps she was rather talkative after repeated contact with humanity over the ages.

“To be more specific, the desires of those who wander within become reality, even if their desire was absurd to begin with. The glamor that blocks their cognizance of this is only to make sure they don’t find it strange.”

“Everything here is reality,” I mumbled. “The glamor is only a part of the magic. You did mention that earlier. The discomfort I felt was because of these impossibilities, then?”

Any desire could be granted in a way that felt consistent with reality. It genuinely was a world of dreams.

“Yes. However, if the glamor is used for something other than tampering with the inconsistencies of the manifested desires of those who wander in, it loses its potency. Do you remember? When you peeked on Shiran and Kei, you realized that her spirit couldn’t detect you. That’s why you noticed it. At the time, I used my glamor magic to show you that I had no ill will.”

“That wasn’t a normal function of the Misty Lodge, so even though you managed to fool the spirit, you couldn’t hide the fact that you’d done so?”

“That’s how it is. I specialize in constructing the magic called the Misty Lodge, so anything unrelated to it is additional magic and therefore a step or two below in power.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s plenty impressive on its own. Nobody notices the impossible...” I suddenly realized something. “Oh yeah, I didn’t feel anything off about some of my companions. Why is that?”

“It’s simple. If you didn’t feel anything peculiar about them, it means nothing had changed from before. You, Mana, Ayame, and Kei didn’t change one bit.”

“In other words...”

“You are all satisfied with the present.”

That made sense. That was why she’d told me, “It’s because you have such a personality that you didn’t change at all.” It was true. So long as I had the girls by my side, I was pretty much fully satisfied. So long as they were happy, I could hope for nothing more. That was why I’d remained the same even after entering this dimension of dreams. Maybe Katou, Kei, and Ayame felt the same way. On the other hand, it meant everyone else had some sort of desire.

The glamor had already come undone for me. I was the only one who knew how everyone had changed. That said, I didn’t know how these changes reflected their desires. Well...I knew how for one of them. Gerbera was easy to understand; she was simple and honest. At the risk of sounding like I’m bragging, she was adorable like that. It made me feel ashamed as a man, though, because I couldn’t withstand her embrace. At the very least, I could

strengthen my body some more. I mean, she desired my embrace that badly.

“Thank you for explaining things to me. That really clears it up,” I said with a smile. “I’ve been racking my brain trying to figure out what I got caught up in these last three days.”

“I really must apologize for that.”

“Like I said, I don’t really blame you, so don’t worry about it. Well, I was rather anxious,” I added with a wry smile. “It was like I was dancing all alone on — Ow.”

A sudden pain shot through my left hand, making me swallow my words. I looked down to see Asarina gnawing on my finger. I smiled gently at the sight.

“Right. I wasn’t alone. You were with me all along.”

“Ssster!”

“Now that I think about it... Why were we the only ones unaffected by the glamor?”

“Oh, about that. This child has a high resistance to glamors,” the Misty Lodge replied, watching the two of us with a smile. “Her resistance even had an influence on you, seeing that you’re connected.”

“Oh, so it’s because of Asarina?”

“Ssster...”

“I’m not blaming you or anything. Don’t worry.”

I poked Asarina as she drooped down. The Misty Lodge giggled at this.

“Incidentally, Gerbera was also just barely caught in it,” she said. “That girl really is beyond the norm.”

“Is that so? I was under the impression that you were much stronger than her. At the very least, you’ve lived longer than she has, right?”

Gerbera hadn’t obtained a heart until I met her, but that wasn’t the case for the Misty Lodge. Her legends were passed down across all territories, meaning she’d gone a long time without assaulting any humans. That would be impossible for a monster without a will.

However, without the aid of my ability, it took a long time for a monster to properly gain a heart. The Misty Lodge had definitely spent much more time wandering this world than Gerbera had. I thought that meant the Misty Lodge's power would match that difference, but the Misty Lodge shook her head.

"Didn't I tell you?" she asked. "I *specialize* in constructing the magic called the Misty Lodge. I don't have much power otherwise." She cast her eyes down, her golden-brown hair swaying about. "I've done nothing but drift around this world for a long time. I've seen many things in that time..."

She lightly shook her head, pulled herself together, and smiled playfully.

"Hee hee. Actualizing this world is remarkably inefficient, you know? Once activated, I can only maintain it for three or four days maximum. It requires an enormous amount of mana. I have to spend many years slowly building up the magic before I can activate it. In the end, quite a lot of mana gets poured into the glyph."

"Many years...? How many, exactly?"

"Hmm. Somewhere around forty, I guess?"

"Forty?!"

Her casual answer left me speechless. But now that I thought about it, witness accounts happened every few decades. That gap was apparently because the Misty Lodge needed time to prepare this magic. And she'd used that magic just for us.

"Hey... Why did you bring me into your world?" I asked. I couldn't help but wonder.

"I have two reasons," she started smoothly, having expected this question already. "First, I wanted to know about you. I wanted to know the man accompanied by monsters, and the ones who adore him. I wanted to see your relationships with my own eyes. After watching you for the last three days...I can tell that you are truly important to each other. All of the girls you treat so precious were adorable."

She giggled, a note of approval in her tone.

“I spoke with them on several occasions. They were so cute I felt a little embarrassed myself.”

I wondered what they had talked about. I was a little curious, but I decided not to pry. There was plenty to feel shy about.

“And the other reason?” I asked.

“I’d like to form a friendly relationship with you, my dear,” the Misty Lodge said, her slender shoulders slumping. “It seems I’ve failed in this regard...”

“All’s well that ends well. I’m grateful for what you did. So? Why did you want to find out more about us and win our favor?”

There had to be a reason that the Misty Lodge had contacted us. She had to have some kind of objective.

The Misty Lodge stopped smiling. Her gentle atmosphere remained as it was, but her expression turned serious.

“I have a request,” she said, correcting her posture. “I would like to join you on your journey.” Her voice was much crisper than before. “And then, I would like to see how your fate ends.”

“My fate...?”

The peculiarity of her phrasing wasn’t the only thing that bewildered me. I sensed a resolve in her completely separate from her desire to accompany us.

“You see, I’ve been searching for someone like you...for years, and years, and years, all this time.”

“What do you mean?” I asked with a grimace. “I don’t mind you coming along, but why search for someone like me? Do you mean you’ve been searching for a visitor?” It was the most probable reason I could think of.

“No, not just any visitor,” she replied. “You specifically, my dear. I’ve been searching for someone who can communicate with a monster’s heart.”

My bewilderment only deepened.

“You guessed that the glamor came from a monster like me who possesses a will. But you could only guess that because you’re in a special position thanks to

your unique power, right? Beings like me aren't known to this world. There are many other things that aren't known either..."

"There's more...?" My pulse sped up. I could tell I was about to hear something exceedingly important. "What's unknown to this world, exactly?" I unconsciously clasped my hands tight atop the table.

"Do you think you're the first to be able to communicate with a monster's heart?"

I was caught off guard, unable to reply immediately.

"I'm not...?"

At the very least, I'd never heard of such a thing. The only exception was Kudou Riku, the boy who, while a monster tamer, chose to become a demon king. He was supposed to be the only other one.

"Then...are you saying there was some other human out there who could do the same?" I asked, unable to hide how shaken I was. "But that's impossible. I investigated whether there had been anyone like me in the past the moment I joined human society. I investigated the legends of the saviors...people who had cheats like I do, who came to this world over the ages. Not a single story among them mentions forming a bond with monsters."

"Do you believe that history always speaks the truth, my dear?"

This was enough to render me silent. For example, when I first heard of the savior legends from Shiran, I'd felt they were too clean, as if they were all made up. Every single one of the saviors heroically fought monsters, without exception. That was what the legends said. However, the visitors I'd seen with my own eyes weren't anything like that.

We weren't heroes. We were humans, naturally full of weaknesses. Kudou had turned into a Demon King because that unsightly weakness had trampled him underfoot, turning all his thoughts into hatred. Takaya Jun had turned into the Mad Beast. Of course, our case was special in that a thousand visitors had appeared in the Depths, but it was hard to believe that not a single person in centuries of history had strayed from the right path.

The legends of the saviors didn't tell of these messy realities. Such things

were practically nonexistent. If so, then what other inconvenient truths had been swept under the rug? For example, what about the elves? There had been a time when spirits were considered a type of monster, and the elves who used magic to contract with said spirits, much like some kind of monster tamer, were treated as traitors to humanity. Things had gone as far as elves being stoned in the streets.

Say a savior appeared who was a monster tamer, or who could communicate with monsters in some other form. Would history really tell their tale? Maybe it was because these stories were kept hidden that the knowledge that monsters could have wills remained unknown to the general public. That was what the Misty Lodge was hinting at, and the fact that she was doing so now meant...

“Don’t tell me... You actually know of someone aside from me?”

She knew of one of my predecessors wiped from history. She knew of their existence, the course of their life, and their fate. That was why she was interested in me and had spent so long preparing to contact me. If so...

“What have you seen?” I muttered.

What had happened to them? How had they meet their end? I couldn’t possibly let this opportunity slip me by. Unfortunately, the Misty Lodge shook her head.

“I cannot speak of this any more than I have,” she said.

“Why?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not doing it to be mean. I’ve only ever watched. I’ve been a spectator. I’ve never been on the stage. As a bystander, I don’t have the right to speak of him... Because of that, I believe some things won’t get across even if I do speak of him.”

She was apologetic, but I saw determination in her expression.

“I find the relationship you have with your servants to be priceless. I’m cheering all of you on. Because of that, if you want to know more, then I’d like you to visit the Dark Woods in northern Aker.”

“Why there?”

I perused the map in my head. A patch of Dark Woods spread out west of the Kitrus Mountains. It was a massive forest that served as the border between the Alliance kingdom of Aker and the Imperial territory of Longue County.

“You don’t mean...”

“Yes. There is someone who knows the past there. If you would like to continue living in this world with those girls who are so dear to you, I’m sure it will be advantageous for you to listen to them.”

“I see...”

I could at least guess to a certain extent from what she’d said. Considering it was a Dark Woods, the master of the forest had to be a powerful nonmigratory monster. I’d heard about the one who lived there. It was called the Rage of the Lands. That was likely the name of the monster who knew the past, who knew of someone else like me.

I didn’t know how this monster was related to the Misty Lodge. It probably had something to do with one of these people in the past who could talk to monsters. For now, it was more than enough for me that she was saying this out of concern for us.

“Right. I’ll keep that in mind,” I said.

The Misty Lodge broke into a delighted smile.

Chapter 18: The Misty Lodge

“Okay then,” the Misty Lodge said, standing up now that we’d reached a good stopping point. “Time certainly flies when you’re having fun. We’ve talked quite a lot.”

She casually swept her arm, and in an instant, everything atop the table vanished. It was...well, not all that surprising. This was her world, after all.

“I suppose I should start preparing to go with you.”

After she’d cleaned up everything between us with a single sweep of her arm, the Misty Lodge walked up to me. I wasn’t wary of her anymore, but I did find this strange.

“Prepare? By doing what?” I asked.

She stopped right in front of me and said, “I am the magic called the Misty Lodge. Aside from times like now when I’ve constructed my world, I am but an empty existence that drifts around. To go with you, my existence needs to be anchored to your body.” She looked down at me with a smile as I remained seated. “So, let’s form a contract.”

“A contract?” I knit my brows. That was awfully familiar vocabulary. “Is it the same contract that elves form with spirits?”

“Yes. Fundamentally, you can consider it the same.”

“So a monster like you can perform the same contract as a spirit?”

Perhaps I’d sounded a bit suspicious. Still, the Misty Lodge nodded as if it was no big deal.

“Of course. Spirits aren’t all that different from me.”

I stiffened at her casual remark. Seeing my reaction, her eyes widened curiously.

“Oh dear. Is it that surprising? Spirits are also mana with no substantial form. Doesn’t that make them the same as me?”

“That certainly might be the case, but...” When she put it like that, it made perfect sense, but I couldn’t get the bad taste out of my mouth. “Does that mean, umm, that spirits are monsters?”

“Well, that’s how it is.”

As I expected, the Misty Lodge nonchalantly confirmed my suspicions. It was inconsequential to her as a monster. However, to humans, it was a different matter. Elves had once been discriminated against precisely because spirits had been considered monsters. Now I learned that they absolutely were monsters.

“Conversely, you could also say I’m a spirit, I suppose,” the Misty Lodge added. “It depends on how you interpret it. Is there something wrong with that?” She cocked her head.

I was shaken by the unexpected truth, but even if spirits were monsters, it didn’t mean that elves were traitors who worked with monsters. It didn’t change the injustice they’d suffered in the past. And it didn’t matter to me either whether spirits were monsters. This, of course, couldn’t be made public, but if I took care, it wouldn’t be much of a problem if it slipped either.

“Sorry for steering things off track. Please continue,” I said.

The Misty Lodge nodded. “Very well. I think you’ll be better off asking Shiran to teach you how to employ the contract after it’s formed. The sensation shouldn’t be all that different from materializing and employing a spirit.”

“You really are the same as a spirit.”

One difference of note was that the Misty Lodge had a firm ego and that I wasn’t an elf.

“Sadly, I’m horribly inefficient, so I won’t be able to do much for you. You should refrain from having me constantly materialized the way Shiran does with her spirit.”

“‘inefficient’... You mean the rate at which you consume mana?”

“Yes. Using my own mana, I can maintain a solid form for a certain amount of time, but...”

“Got it. That mana’s usually reserved for the magic to create this misty world,

right? If you're fine with it, I don't mind if you come out only when you want to."

It wasn't like I was going to acquire the power of a high monster, but this was definitely a power-up for me. I needed to figure out what exactly I could do with the contract by learning the basics from Shiran and trying things. It was sure to be a lot of work, but my heart danced a little at the prospect. I was looking forward to the future.

"Wait, hang on a second. Before that, we have to form a contract, right? I have no idea what to do. Should we wake Shiran up?"

"There's no need for that, my dear," the Misty Lodge said, giggling and shaking her head. "How much do you happen to know about contracting with spirits?"

"Only that it exists. I don't know any of the details."

"So we need to start from the beginning. A contract is, in short, magic to anchor a wandering spirit to your own body. The hardest part is forming a connection with the spirit. Those who take on the challenge need to meld their soul into the world through meditation, entering the same place the spirits inhabit."

"I think you needed...a noble soul, and a pure prayer?" I asked, remembering what Shiran had told me.

The Misty Lodge nodded. "Yes. Spirits favor pure souls. Without one, it's impossible to contact them. And without a strong will, you can't bring your soul back after melding it with the world. That is why a spirit contract is considered a trial."

Contracts with spirits didn't really have anything to do with me, so I'd never asked about them in detail before. I found it rather interesting.

"I'm already here in front of you, though, so those steps are unnecessary."

"Okay. I understand now," I said with a nod, then frowned. "Still... What do I do?"

"Nothing in particular," she replied frankly. "All you have to do is accept me."

“I mean, even if you put it like that...”

In a sense, this request was harder to fulfill than some specific ritual. Did that mean I could do it without really putting much thought into it? If so...

I gazed at the Misty Lodge, focusing like I would on the mental path.

“Oh...”

As I did, I felt the mental path form a connection between us. This was the first time since Shiran that I had to focus to form a connection. Shiran and the Misty Lodge... The commonality between them was that they were self-conscious before meeting me. Maybe it was just difficult for me to form a connection to such beings.

“Wow. You really did it by accepting me,” the Misty Lodge said.

“Didn’t you believe I could?”

“Knowing of it and experiencing it are different things, my dear.”

She had a point there.

“Could you hold still a moment?” she said, stretching a hand toward me.

She touched my body here and there, much like the process of palpation. It tickled a little, but I held it in and waited quietly. After a while, the Misty Lodge’s face suddenly tightened.

“What’s wrong? Is there a problem?” I asked.

She looked up at me, her expression somewhat stern. “Upon closer inspection...it looks like you’re cracked.”

“Cracked?” I repeated, cocking my head at the alien term.

“There’s a crack in your soul. Well, any human will have a flaw or two, and when forming a contract with a spirit, they’re also used as a connection point...”

“Then isn’t it fine?”

I had no sense for what she was saying. It didn’t sound like a major problem, but the Misty Lodge shook her head.

“Your flaw is a little unnatural.”

“I don’t really get what you’re saying.”

“Does anything come to mind? Anything at all.”

Now that she asked, several examples came to mind. In that mysterious space I’d dived in to save Shiran, my projection had cracked. Also, during the fight against the Mad Beast, I’d heard something in me break.

“So something does come to mind,” she said with a sigh, either guessing by my expression or through the mental path. “You shouldn’t worry those cute girls by pushing yourself too far.”

“It hasn’t really proven to be an inconvenience, though. Aah, but...Shiran told me something similar before and got really angry.”

“Shiran did? Well, I can see her doing that.”

“So, about this contract, is there a possibility it will affect my body somehow?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. A contract with me isn’t all that different from simply connecting your mental path. Just as I said before, it doesn’t pose a threat to your life like the contracts elves make with spirits.”

“I see.”

That conformed with my instinctual understanding of my own ability. It told me I could form a contract without any problems—so long as I wasn’t unreasonable, at least. I didn’t intend on hesitating if push came to shove, but I didn’t have any reason to harm myself right now.

“Okay then, now that our preparations are complete, shall we form a contract?” the Misty Lodge asked.

“Yeah, go ahead,” I answered with a nod.

She put her hand over my right eye. “We’ll be roommates from now on. I’m looking forward to it, Asarina.”

“Ssster!”

Mist gushed out of her hand as Asarina watched over us. The mist constructed a glyph, rotating and contracting as it drew nearer to my right eye. I

resisted the urge to shut my eye on reflex and accepted the glyph.

“Ugh...”

I felt a throbbing deep in my skull and groaned, putting my hand over my right eye unintentionally.

“Contract established,” the Misty Lodge said with satisfaction.

That declaration was the trigger. The smiling Misty Lodge began fading away. At the same time, the building we were staying in started blurring out. The world of mist was dissolving.

“M-Master?!”

Having noticed this, the girls came flying out of their rooms. By that time, the Misty Lodge’s body was practically gone.

“Wh-What...?”

The girls stood there in bewilderment. All of them were back to how they normally were—this time, for real. Reality, which this most unique of grand magics had rewritten, was returning to normal.

“Did you enjoy this time of dreams?” the Misty Lodge asked them all with a smile. “Oh, there’s no need to worry. You can hear the details from our dear master after this. As for your desires that became a reality in this world, each of you will fully remember everything pertaining to your own desire, but nothing regarding the others’.”

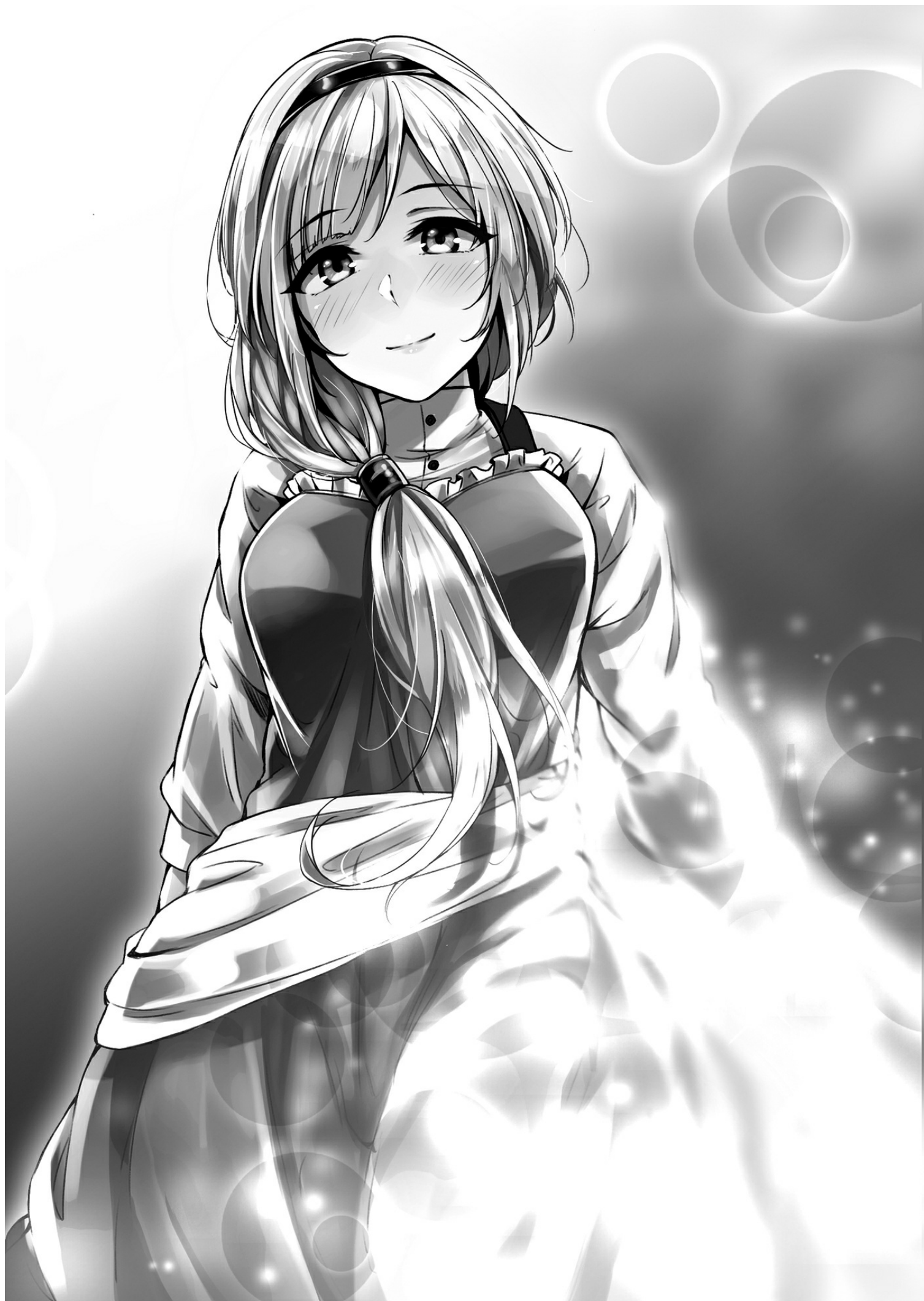
She gave me a wink. I guessed she was asking me to keep quiet about my remembering everything. Well, it was better that way. Some of them would want to know what had happened, but it would be more natural for them to ask about it.

“Oh, one more thing, my dear,” she added, suddenly remembering something. She clapped her now-transparent hands together. “Could I perhaps have a name too?”

“Right...” Faced with her hopeful gaze, I gave it some thought. I had several options at the ready in case I gained more servants. “How about...Salvia?”

“Salvia... Mm, a good name.”

The Misty Lodge—Salvia—smiled sweetly at me, and her figure melted away into the air.



“I’ll be in your care, Master.”

All that was left of her was her voice brushing against my ear. At the same time, the entire building began turning into mist. It all cleared up in the blink of an eye, and we found ourselves under the morning sun.

Thus, we awoke from our three-day dream in the mist, and I became the contractor for my new servant, the Misty Lodge Salvia.

Chapter 19: The Visitors in Faraway Lands *lino*

Yuna's POV

Three days after I parted with Majima's group, I stepped foot once more in the city of Serrata in Lorenz County. I came here to see Louis, the one who'd said that Majima Takahiro was one of the monster tamers who'd attacked Fort Tilia—though that turned out to be false information.

I didn't really want to press him for answers as to why he lied to me or anything like that. I just wanted to see and speak with him. When I recalled the way his fists had trembled in righteous indignation, I still didn't think that he'd been lying.

If my eyes were rotten and he was actually some kind of swindler... Well, it would be unforgivable, but that would still be the better outcome. If it was the result of a misunderstanding or some kind of miscommunication, or if someone else had tricked him, that would be a real tragedy. If he truly was the type of person I believed he was, he would understand if I talked to him about it. If he wasn't, I'd simply have to beat him down.

With that in mind, I vigorously knocked on the doors of Fort Serrata. Unfortunately, to jump right to the story's end, my enthusiasm ended with nowhere to go.

It had been about two weeks since I'd last been here, and Louis was gone now. I wasn't able to get a meeting with Travis from the Holy Order either, who'd been with Louis when I last saw him. According to Count Lorenz, who greeted me in their stead, the two of them had already left Serrata with the Maclaurin Provincial Army.

The reason Louis had been in Serrata in the first place was to act as Margrave Maclaurin's proxy and to take in the soldiers who'd survived Fort Tilia's fall. To do so, he had to communicate with various other places, hence his stay in Fort Serrata, where that was possible to accomplish. During that time, the Second Company of the Imperial Knights—the ones who'd gone with me into the

Depths to rescue the Colony's home team members—had paid him a visit.

The Second Company was based in Fort Tilia to begin with, so Louis had immediately handed over the responsibility of Fort Tilia's soldiers to them. As a result, Louis and Travis no longer had anything left to do here, so they had taken their leave. That had happened about a week ago.

Count Lorenz didn't know where they'd gone, but if Louis had returned to his lord's side, then he was probably in the mining city Nourias, at the center of the Margraviate of Maclaurin. As a digression, the Second Company of the Imperial Knights had also left Serrata for the imperial capital with the home team survivors.

I was left crestfallen by my fool's errand. However, there was one unexpected stroke of good luck. Count Lorenz informed me that the exploration team had arrived in Serrata two days ago. The group from Fort Ebenus had gone through Viscum, one of the Three Eastern Kingdoms to the north of the fortress, then turned west into Lorenz County. They were apparently staying here for a short while before heading to the imperial capital. Therefore, I immediately requested to be guided to our leader.



Our leader, Nakajima Kojirou, greeted me. It had been a while since we'd last seen each other. He smiled cheerfully, and despite his recent long journey, he showed no signs of fatigue.

"It's good you made it back, Iino. I'm glad you're safe."

After I gave him a brief explanation of what had happened, he called the main members of the exploration team together.

"Based on the gravity of the information, we should share it with everyone, right?" he said, giving his reasonable opinion.

I followed our leader to a meeting room in Fort Serrata, and we waited a short while for all the other members to arrive.

"Oh! Long time no see, Yuna-senpai!"

A petite girl boisterously entered the room. Her smile was the definition of

vivacious. It felt nostalgic to see it now.

“Long time no see, Aoi. How’ve you been?” I replied.

“A-OK! Looks like you’re doing good too. I haven’t seen you since Ebenus, so I guess it’s been, like, half a month or so?”

This cute girl with big round eyes and a short ponytail was Mitarai Aoi. She was endlessly cheerful and energetic, and contrary to what one would expect, she was one of the exploration team’s upper brass, known as the Stalwart Snow White.

“It’s been a while for us too, huh, Ishida?” I said.

“Yo,” the large schoolboy behind Aoi replied briefly.

“It’s good to see you.”

His name was Ishida Tetsuo. He had a rugged face and a huge body. He had to be around 190 centimeters tall. It looked like he’d grown even taller since I’d last seen him. Boys’ growth spurts really were amazing. He was the very picture of a gentle giant, and another member of the exploration team’s upper brass, known as the Indomitable Will.

Back in the Colony, he and Aoi were a famous pair of first-year cheaters. They had known each other since grade school and were very close. They didn’t seem to be dating or anything, but they definitely had an intimate friendship. Even now, they took seats side by side at the table.

Aoi immediately looked like she was going to start talking to me, but before she could, a chilly voice cut her off.

“You’re late, Mitarai, Ishida.”

It was the exploration team leader’s assistant, Kuriyama Moeko. She looked at the two first-year students through her frameless glasses, her eyes cold.

The two childhood friends had very different reactions.

“Sorry,” Ishida said.

“Mrgh. What could we do? We were supposed to be on break today,” Aoi added. “I got dragged outta bed here. I’m actually super busy with all the

preparations, ya know?”

“A day off isn’t an excuse to laze around in bed past noon.”

“Aaah! Aaah! Aaah! I don’t wanna hear any lectures!”

“Aoi...”

Aoi plugged her ears as Ishida chided her. They were the same as always, and so was Kuriyama. I was half-relieved to see this, and half-hoping she wouldn’t turn her focus on me.

As I watched their exchange, another voice joined us.

“Looks like everyone’s here, so shouldn’t we get started already?” said a skinny boy with glasses. He was grinning. “Everyone’s really busy and all. Right, Iino? Don’t you think so too?”

“Yeah...” I replied with a forced smile.

He was also the same as ever. I turned to look at him. His name was Okazaki Takuma. He was a second-year student like me, and held the name the Almighty Vessel. Among all the exploration team members here, he struck up conversation with me the most after Aoi. Well, in his case, it was more that he often conversed with girls. I’d never heard any stories among the girls of him laying a hand on anyone, so I did find him to be a nice person, but I wasn’t that great at dealing with him.

Boys like Watanabe positively disdained him, probably because of some kind of protective instinct for the girls on their teams. Whenever Watanabe had snapped at him, telling him not to act all friendly with me, Okazaki had merely shrugged and sighed. His attitude had likely irritated Watanabe even more, but Okazaki didn’t care at all about stuff like that, so the two of them had never gotten along.

After Okazaki had driven him away, Watanabe had always gone to Juumonji to complain. Juumonji would then tell him, “I get where you’re coming from, but calm down,” even though he also looked fed up with Watanabe’s behavior. He’d throw me sneaking glances for some reason...

Let’s stop there, I told myself. Those memories hurt too much.

“Nakajima, you say something to them too,” Okazaki said to our leader.

“Huh? Me?” he replied, wide eyed. He clearly hadn’t expected to be brought into the conversation. “Even if you ask me... Well, whatever. It’s fine. You can fight and joke around all you want. We’re friends, after all. Right, Moeko?”

“No? I’d rather you urge everyone to maintain a little more order, Captain.”

“I asked the wrong person. Right, Kubota, Shimazu?” our leader said, turning to the last two people to enter the room.

“Don’t drag me into this, Leader.”

“Who knows? Just do as you like.”

The one who’d replied first was Kubota Yousuke, and the one who’d replied after was Shimazu Yui. Both were third-year students like our leader. The long-haired Kubota was known as the Multiplex, and the quiet Shimazu was known as the Fairy Ring.

The Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya and the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji had stayed behind in the Colony. The Sturm und Drang Yuzukisono Rui and the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya had left the exploration team while I was gone. Those four, and the seven people in this room now, made up the upper brass of the exploration team that had once protected the Colony. Even though there were fewer of us now, some things hadn’t changed.

“Everyone’s so cold to me...” our leader grumbled.

We all laughed. The exploration team didn’t really have a pecking order. We were more of a hodgepodge of parties, so even back in the Colony, it had been pretty common to see our leader play the clown like this. I watched him, feeling nostalgic, as he then turned to me.

“Now then,” he said, “if we spend too much time chatting, Moeko will get angry at us. Iino, could you tell us your story?”

“Yes.”

Thanks to our leader’s silly act, the atmosphere in the room was very pleasant. After I’d confirmed that everyone was in high spirits and looking at me, I began telling them everything that had happened since I’d left Fort

Ebenus.



After I finished my story, our leader gathered everyone's attention.

"To summarize, Fort Tilia's assailant, Kudou Riku, is in hiding. The other suspect, Majima Takahiro, is considered unrelated to the attack based on his own testimony and that of the people from Fort Tilia who are accompanying him. However, Majima refuses to join or cooperate with the exploration team. Also, Takaya Jun has turned into a beast and is missing. His safety and status are currently unknown..."

"There's not really anything we can do about either of those, at least not right away," Kuriyama said.

"That's true, Moeko. That being the case, we should prioritize an issue that we *can* deal with," our leader said sullenly. "About Heaven's Voice... If this is true, we have a major problem."

"Heaven's Voice is the cheater who secretly coordinated the attack on Fort Tilia. Does someone like that really exist?" Kubota said with a grimace. "I find it kinda hard to believe."

"I do too, but we have multiple testimonies of this now. The information is fairly credible," Kuriyama said.

"But ya know... Do we really got a guy like that in our family?" Kubota reiterated.

"They may not be part of our 'family' anymore. Back when we were at Fort Ebenus, a lot of people left our group, remember? This person could have been among them, right?"

"Aah. You've got a point there."

"I mean, that's highly likely," Okazaki said, joining the third-years' conversation.

"Hm? Why do you think so, Okazaki?" our leader asked.

"It's simple, Nakajima. We cheaters have tremendous combat strength, but that's only compared to normal people. Just within the exploration team, there

are plenty who possess the same amount of power or are even stronger than other cheaters. If you stay in that kind of environment for too long, it'd be over the second you're found out. There'd be no escape. Oh, it'd be a different story with the Skanda's fast legs, though."

Okazaki shot me a fleeting glance, then continued his explanation.

"Unless they are some huge idiot, they would've known that information on this Heaven's Voice would eventually reach the exploration team. If they ran away the moment we heard about it, it'd be like screaming they were the culprit. In that case, there's no point in hanging around such a dangerous group. It's safe to assume that Heaven's Voice ran away from the exploration team before the information reached us."

"I see. That makes sense," our leader said with a nod.

Okazaki looked triumphant as he added, "In that case, everyone who split up from us at the time could be in league with Heaven's Voice. It's possible they all joined forces so it wouldn't seem weird that Heaven's Voice left the exploration team."

"Hey, Okazaki," Kubota cut in bitterly. "Watch your mouth. Even if they've left us, they're still our comrades."

"Yes. I know. I don't want to suspect them either, but the possibility exists, right? I think we should consider every possibility we can."

Kubota grimaced. I could sympathize with him in this regard. Okazaki was making sense. There was no evidence to contradict the scenario he posited. It was only logical that we prepare ourselves for every possibility. That said, of the 140 or so members who participated in the first expeditionary force, almost half of them had left us. I couldn't imagine any of them being traitors, and I didn't want to believe they were either. They had all once been comrades in arms whom I would have trusted to watch my back.

There were those among them that I'd gotten along with well. Anyone would get angry hearing someone lump them all together and demean them. The only ones who didn't look hurt by Okazaki's statement were Kuriyama, who seemed to share his opinion, and our leader, who couldn't let his emotions show, considering his position.

First off, even though we couldn't outright deny the possibility, it was very hard to believe that that many people had betrayed us. Realistically speaking, if Heaven's Voice had reached out to over half of the people who participated in the first expeditionary force, it would be much more likely that information on them would end up leaking to us.

"Thanks, Okazaki. I'll keep that possibility in mind," our leader said, taking control of the conversation.

Okazaki let out a small gasp and backed down.

"But Captain, what are we to do?" Kuriyama asked. "Problems are coming up one after another."

"Aah, yeah, they are. We need to seriously consider how to deal with all this..." our leader replied, putting his hand to his chin, deep in thought.

"One after another? What do you mean?" I asked curiously. "Did something else happen aside from the news I shared?"

"Yeah. That's actually the reason we're in Serrata. Not everything is clear yet, but we've gathered some information, so I thought I'd use this chance to discuss that too."

Now that I thought of it, I'd heard the exploration team had arrived in Serrata two days ago. The reason they hadn't left yet was apparently because there'd been some kind of problem, and they'd been gathering information on it. My story wasn't the only thing we were gathered here for.

"Iino doesn't know the details, so let's start from the beginning," our leader said. "It seems there's a fake of us out there."

"Hwuh?" I let out a strange noise. "Of the exploration team?"

"Of a visitor, to be precise. A fake savior, I suppose... It's been two and a half months since we reached Fort Ebenus. It's about time for news to spread among the people of this world that visitors have appeared. This includes the fact that we've appeared in unprecedented numbers."

"It's also known that we haven't accepted the invite from the imperial capital and have been in the Woodlands for a long time," Kuriyama added. "After all,

we received nonstop greetings during our stay in Fort Ebenus from nobles who didn't care about the long journey."

"Indeed. There was also a royal visit from Viscum, the nation neighboring Fort Ebenus. That was pretty troublesome to deal with."

"That's your job, Captain," Kuriyama stated.

"Well, that's the gist of it, so people have been watching our movements," our leader said bluntly, then turned my way. "Of course, it's also known that those guys scattered from Fort Ebenus two months ago."

"Does that mean someone is faking being one of them?" I asked.

"From the looks of it, probably. We investigated this for the last couple of days and found out that the fake savior showed up in a group of tightly packed noble territories east of Lorenz County and the Margraviate of Maclaurin. That pretty much settles it."

"Uhhh...?"

"That's where a lot of the guys who left the exploration team went to."

That made sense now. A fake savior had been appearing primarily in a region where the former exploration team members had gone. It was an unpleasant thought, but if it was known that saviors were in the region, it was understandable the fake would go there.

"There are a lot of nobles in that region with relatively small territories. They had contacted us pretty early on. Their territories are close to Fort Ebenus, so they have strong connections there, and information gets around quickly. The fast ones came to greet us at the fortress only a week after we got there. Just counting the nobles, there was Count Huxley, Viscount Bann, Viscount Dickson, Count Coppart, Viscount Hubbard... They greeted a lot of our members personally too."

"Oh, they talked to me," Aoi said.

"Me too. You got some too, right, Shimazu?" Kubota chimed in.

"I did..." Shimazu replied.

"Yuna-senpai, you'd already left for Fort Tilia by that time, right?" Aoi asked

me.

“That’s right,” I answered with a nod.

“They were, like, super passionate. You’re really pretty and all, so maybe some hot young noble stud would’ve proposed to you on the spot if you’d been there.”

“That sounds a little far fetched...” I said, forcing myself to smile.

“Not really,” Okazaki remarked. “A noble told me that he wanted me as his daughter’s groom. I can’t possibly marry someone I’ve never met before, so I declined.”

“R-Really?”

“Saviors are really special to this world,” our leader said gravely. “Besides, there are many nobles in the southern Empire who are troubled by monster attacks. Unlike the north, where reclamation has been finished for a long time, the south is dotted with Dark Woods where many monsters lay their nests. We refer to them all as nobles as if they’re equals, but not everyone has as much territory and power as Margrave Maclaurin or Count Lorenz.”

Our leader paused there, sighing languidly.

“Normally, saviors head straight for the capital, right? After that, they spend most of their time with the Holy Order, so it’s pretty hard for the southern nobles to keep in contact with them. That’s how it usually is, but we ended up staying a while at Fort Ebenus, a good distance away from the capital. They can’t reclaim any Dark Woods without the strength of a savior, so seeing how they’re suffering damage from monster attacks, we can’t call them selfish for being desperate and approaching us early.”

“So people left the exploration team because these nobles depended on them?” I asked.

“There were those who said they wanted to do as they pleased the moment we got out of the Woodlands. I’m just saying some left for other reasons. In any case, those former members caught wind of the fake savior rumors, and the information has been flowing from there. They’re a little too far from Serrata, so we haven’t figured out more than that yet.”

I nodded. "I understand the situation now. Thank you for the explanation."

"We need to share what information we have," our leader said, waving his hand to tell me not to worry about it. "Now then, about what the exploration team will do from here..."

He put his hand to his chin again, pondering deeply.

"I think the first thing we should deal with is Heaven's Voice," he concluded. "Unfortunately, I can't come up with a good way to handle this... Anyone have any ideas?"

Our opponent was a tricky one who'd moved behind the scenes during both Fort Tilia's attack and Takaya's rampage. Normally, it would be difficult to come up with some kind of countermeasure. However, the people in this room were cheaters, and we were higher in number than usual. Cheaters usually only showed up in this world one or two at a time. Plus, we were the upper brass of the exploration team, meaning we were very strong.

"Leader," Okazaki said, raising his hand. "I think we can do something about this Heaven's Voice."

Gulps could be heard around the room.

"Really?" our leader asked.

"Yes. At the very least, we can smoke out whether they're still part of the exploration team," Okazaki claimed with confidence, then waited for our leader's go-ahead.

"Tell me more."

"Yes," Okazaki said, standing. "According to Iino, Heaven's Voice is a cheater who can use telepathic magic to converse with someone over a long distance. This is definitely a marvelous ability. Nonetheless, it can't possibly be wholly unrestricted. No matter what form it takes, this type of ability needs some kind of connection with its target."

"A connection?" our leader asked.

"You can't throw a ball to someone when you have no idea where they are, right? It's the same thing here. If they don't know where their target is, they

can't send them telepathic messages."

Okazaki continued like a storyteller recounting a fable.

"In truth, Heaven's Voice sent messages to Fort Tilia when they'd never been there themselves. They could only do that because they'd already formed a connection with their targets beforehand. To put it another way, the person maintaining these special connections is the suspect behind Heaven's Voice."

"Hang on, why do you...? No, never mind. I get it," our leader said, narrowing his eyes. "Okazaki, can you do the same thing as Heaven's Voice?"

"I can," he answered as if it were perfectly obvious. Nobody in the room questioned this. "That's why I know how it works," he stated proudly. "Oh, I'm not Heaven's Voice, obviously."

"Relax. I don't think you're that kind of guy."

I was in complete agreement. If Okazaki were Heaven's Voice, he wouldn't be speaking up here. Even without that conclusion, someone with his personality could never be the suspect.

When they contacted Juumonji and Takaya, Heaven's Voice had taken advantage of the weaknesses in their hearts. I might have had trouble dealing with him, but Okazaki wasn't the type of person who could do something so convoluted. Some others in the room shared my opinion of him, whereas Aoi was looking at him tepidly.

"Okazaki, I have a question for you," our leader said. "Is this connection you mentioned something a third party can identify?"

"Yes. Rather than identify, it's more like sensing whether a connection exists. I'm pretty sure you can tell through a simple handshake. Well, it's also possible that the connection was made without asking, so the suspect will be whoever is connected to many others at once."

"Hang on, Okazaki," Kubota cut in. "If they just cut all the connections, won't this be useless?"

"There's no need to worry about that," Okazaki answered. "Traces of the connection will remain. They'll probably disappear after a month or so, but

cutting the connection isn't an immediate solution. Even if they were to escape us by doing that, we'd still render Heaven's Voice powerless. They'd have to get back in contact with all their targets to fix the connections."

"Can other people use this method to identify the suspect?" Kuriyama asked.

Okazaki thought it over for a bit, then nodded. "Hmm, so long as they specialize somewhat in magic, they should be able to do it. By specialize, I mean by the standards of a cheater, of course."

"In that case..." Kuriyama started, turning to our leader. "Shouldn't you learn how to do this?"

"Me?"

"Oh, I think that's a great idea. I mean, you get along with everyone," Aoi said in agreement.

"She's right. I believe that would be best," I added.

It was clear that Okazaki had quite a few stormy relationships, so there was no better candidate for this role than our leader.

"Very well. I'll do it," our leader said, then grumbled, "My workload keeps piling up, huh?"

"There's no helping that. Suck it up," Kuriyama told him coldly. She was the one primarily responsible for his increased workload to begin with. "It's for the sake of catching this ridiculous idiot who names themselves something as stupid as Heaven's Voice."

"Stupid..." our leader mumbled with mixed emotions.

The unidentified cheater capable of telepathy was likely using the name Heaven's Voice as a matter of convenience. Our leader, on the other hand, probably really liked the name. In fact, he'd come up with pretty much all of the nicknames given to exploration team members.

He hadn't picked his own nickname, but he'd said something along the lines of, "To fight monsters, we need people who can serve as our pillars on the front lines. For that reason, we must give some weight to their names." Then he'd assigned nicknames to the chief members of the exploration team. They'd

actually been fairly effective, but even now, I suspected that at least half the reason our leader had made them was because of his personal tastes.

In any case, we'd come up with a plan to tackle our biggest unresolved issue. There were still other things we needed to decide on, though.

"As for the two remaining issues..." I said. "What should we do about Kudou Riku and the fake savior?"

"After giving it some thought, I think we should visit Margrave Maclaurin," our leader answered. My expression stiffened. "Something about Majima Takahiro's account bothers me."

"Majima's account?"

"Yes. According to you, the margrave and Majima have never met, right? If the margrave gave you false information despite this fact, then it's possible he doesn't have any hostile intent toward Majima himself, but toward visitors as a whole. I'd like to find out what's going on there. If necessary, we'll need to deal with it too."

"I see," I replied with an understanding nod.

"Well, if the margrave is hostile toward just Majima Takahiro, then I'd like to help Majima if I can."

"Huh? Why?"

As far as I knew, our leader and Majima didn't know each other. Majima was a cheater, but he wasn't a member of the exploration team. On the contrary, he was very wary of us. He wasn't entirely opposed to us, but considering the high likelihood that Heaven's Voice was among our ranks, he viewed us as potential enemies. There was no reason for our leader to be worried about someone like that.

"Are you acquainted with him or something?" I asked.

"No, that's not it. I simply have a one-sided interest in him, nothing more."

"An interest in Majima...?" I said with an unintentional scowl.

"Yeah. He escaped the Colony and survived in the Woodlands alongside friendly monsters, right? Isn't that impressive? Given the chance, I definitely

want to speak with him... Huh? What's with that face, lino?"

"Nothing."

I averted my gaze. Now I remembered that this was the kind of guy our leader was. He was friendly to people who were worth keeping an eye on, and spared nothing in giving them his support. Be that as it may, he had horrible taste for having an interest in a guy like Majima...

"Yuna-senpai, Yuna-senpai. That's not the face a girl should be making. You're, like, super scary," Aoi said.

Conscious of this, I massaged both my cheeks as our leader continued the discussion.

"Also, I'd like to ask the margrave to help deal with Kudou and the fake savior," our leader added. "Of course, only if he doesn't have any strange opinions of us... Still, the margrave is the most prominent noble in the southern Empire. Be it the issue with Kudou or the fake savior, it'd be helpful if we could get him to deal with it."

"That's true," Kuriyama said. "We could pass by the mining city Nourias on the way to the imperial capital. It just about works out right."

"That's how it goes," our leader agreed with a nod, then looked over everyone in the room. "Does anyone else have any opinions regarding this?"

Nobody raised their hands. Nobody was in opposition. In my opinion, this was a good plan for the exploration team. So I thought, but...our leader's eyes moved over the room, quickly glancing at each member present. When his eyes met mine, he stopped for an instant. The slightest bit of suspicion colored his graceful features, but he swiftly moved on to the next person.

"Okay then," he said after looking at everyone, "let's go forward with this plan in mind."

With that, the exploration team's next move had been decided.

Chapter 20: The Skanda's Destination *Iino Yuna's* *POV*

After the meeting ended, I returned to the room assigned to me and lay in bed for a while, staring up at the ceiling. How much time had passed like this? I wondered. After steeling myself, I got up and left the room to go see our leader.

"I thought you'd show up. Well, come on in," he said with a smile when he saw me.

I entered his room. I thought maybe Kuriyama would have been here, but I didn't see her anywhere. That was a bit of a relief.

"It's been quite the day for visitors," our leader said as he shut the door.

I looked around the room and spotted two cups on the table.

"Was someone just here?" I asked.

"Okazaki."

He urged me over to a seat and had someone clean the table.

"Did Okazaki have some kind of business with you? Is this maybe about Heaven's Voice?" I asked as I took a seat across from our leader.

Had there been some kind of development? I'd asked with that thought in mind, but our leader shook his head.

"No. Sorry to dash your hopes, but it had nothing to do with that. He just came to give his opinion on the exploration team's plans from now on."

"His opinions...? Oh, you don't have to tell me if it'll cause problems."

"It's fine, there's nothing to hide. Everyone already knows, anyway," our leader said, waving his hand to say that such consideration was unnecessary. "Okazaki is opposed to the exploration team going to the imperial capital."

"Is that so?"

“Yeah. More precisely, he doesn’t want to link up with the Holy Order. If we do, the Holy Order...or, I suppose, the Holy Church, will obviously place some restrictions on our movements, right? Okazaki questions whether there are any merits to this.”

“It’s true we won’t be able to move about as freely as we can now...but is that really a problem?”

It would be a problem if we were arbitrarily ordered around and forced into action, but so long as that wasn’t the case, we would still have to exercise some self-restraint regardless. Such were the fetters of human relations.

“You’re right,” our leader said, “but Okazaki also has a point worth considering.”

“Meaning?”

“It looks like he’s unusually wary of the guys who left the exploration team.”

“Y-You’re not telling me they’ll become our enemies, are you?”

“Relax. I don’t think so. They don’t have any reason to, anyway. Still, the only ones who could oppose the exploration team are other warriors with the strength of a thousand. In other words, cheaters. Okazaki is wary of this fact. If we join with the Holy Order and lose the freedom to act on our own, then we couldn’t immediately help if something really bad were to happen. It could get dangerous at the critical hour. He’s been saying this for a while now, but with recent news of Heaven’s Voice, he’s getting more on edge.”

Now that I thought of it, Okazaki had sounded bitter when talking about the people who’d left the exploration team. So this was why.

Our leader interlaced his fingers over the table, then looked up at the ceiling. “Well, just as I said before, I at least understand where Okazaki is coming from. But I do wonder. I just can’t help but think something is a little off. I just hope he understands what ‘one warrior worth a thousand’ really means.”

He seemed to be talking to himself. He didn’t notice my questioning gaze and continued with a sigh.

“Firstly, can everyone really claim that they truly understand their own

abilities? Blind belief is dangerous, and also a waste.”

“What do you mean...?”

Our leader lowered his eyes back to me and nodded firmly. “I mean that everyone’s powers should be far more amazing. To the point where my Sword of Light looks like no big deal.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s a bit of an overstatement...” I said with a wry smile.

Nakajima Kojirou’s Sword of Light was definitely one of the strongest powers among all of the cheaters’ inherent abilities. I believed I was among the best when it came to one-on-one hand-to-hand combat. Yet I wasn’t sure whether I could beat our leader one-on-one. His power was just that preeminent.

“Saying anyone should be able to beat you is pretty far-fetched,” I added.

“That’s not true, lino,” he replied with a shake of the head. “If you don’t believe you can beat me, that means you aren’t properly manifesting your abilities. According to Majima, the powers we possess stem from our wishes, right? By fully grasping your own desire, wishing for it even more, and perfectly understanding the power you gain, you should be able to match me.”

“Is that so...?”

His words had such conviction behind them that I mysteriously found myself thinking that he might be right. This man had the power to inspire others. That was because he believed in the potential of his comrades more than any other.

“We’ve gone off track,” he mumbled, coming back to his senses. He scratched his cheek, perhaps embarrassed about how heated he’d gotten.

Using this brief pause as a good opportunity, the servant who’d cleaned up the cups earlier set some tea before us. The two of us took a sip before continuing.

“Ummm... So, you came here to speak your mind, right?” our leader asked. “Go ahead. Say whatever you want.”

“Oh. No. That’s not what I’m here for,” I said, waving both my hands about.

“You don’t need to hold back, you know?” he said dubiously. “You had something you wanted to say during the meeting, right?”

He'd apparently seen right through me then. However, the reason I wanted to say something was a little different.

"Yes, but I'm not opposed to the exploration team's plans or anything."

Visiting Margrave Maclaurin, figuring out his true intentions, asking him to deal with our problems if possible, and then heading to the imperial capital—I believed there was no other course of action for us to take. I had no objections to our leader's plans.

"Hmm. So what is it?" he asked.

"I came here to get your approval for my own personal activities, unrelated to the exploration team's plan."

"Go on," he said with a hint of interest in his voice.

For a single instant, I hesitated. My mind was questioning whether I was making a mistake and being selfish. But then I suddenly remembered something. I remembered the words that serious-looking boy had told me—and reflexively scrunched my face. After that, my words came out fluently.

"I'm thinking of going to the region where our former members went."

"Tell me more," our leader said, narrowing his eyes.

"Of course."

I nodded, then began explaining my idea.



The next day, after I finished preparing for my journey, Aoi and Ishida paid me a visit.

"Hey, Yuna-senpai, are you really going?" Aoi asked without trying to hide her displeasure. "You finally came back to us..."

"Our leader told you the reason yesterday, right?" I answered while checking my luggage. "I can't make the best use of my speed if I go with everyone. I can investigate the region where the fake savior is in person, then still make it to Nourias to join back up with you guys."

"You've got a point...but do you really hafta go there to investigate?"

"I feel like we have far too little information right now," I said. This was what had been on my mind. "I don't think I'll find the fake savior, but I should be able to find out more from visiting the region, right?"

"Well yeah, that's true..." Aoi muttered, still somewhat unconvinced. "You've, like, kinda changed, Yuna-senpai."

"Really? How so?"

"It's like you're more prudent or something."

"Are you saying I used to be foolhardy?" I said, staring at her reproachfully.

"I-I didn't say that. You've got it wrong." Aoi waved her hands and laughed it off. "But I was just thinking. Did something maybe happen with this Majima-senpai guy you met?"

"What's this got to do with Majima...?"

"I mean, you went to chase him, didn't you?"

"I don't really get..."

Just as I started talking, a boy's voice resounded in my head.

"You should put more thought into things before taking action, dumbass."

"Nobody can keep up with your speed as it is. Stand still and think things over once in a while, dumbass."

"He's got nothing to do with it," I declared.

Yes. Nothing at all. Not in the least. No way a guy like that was influencing me.

"Yuna-senpai, you look super scary."

I pushed on my cheeks and grimaced. "It's your fault for saying weird things."

"You make a good point. Let's leave it at that," Aoi said with a nod. "Hmm. I'm not like our leader or anything, but I'm a little interested in this Majima-senpai now too."

"Wow. Aoi, you have horrible taste..."

"No, no, no. Not like that. I'm talking about Mana. She was with him, right?"

"Umm... Do you mean Katou?"

She was talking about that terrifying girl who'd jammed a knife into my thigh. I only vaguely recalled her given name, so I wasn't sure who Aoi meant for a moment. I hadn't talked with Mana much over the few days I spent with them while recuperating. I was well aware that I disliked dealing with her, perhaps even more than I disliked dealing with Majima.

"She was. What, do you know her?" I asked.

"Well duh. We were in the same class. We got along pretty well."

"Hmm. That's a little unexpected... You two seem pretty different."

Katou's expression and mood were always gloomy. I couldn't forget those shudder-inducing dark eyes when she turned against me. But when she was with her travel companions...especially Majima and that monster named Rose, the atmosphere about her was surprisingly different.

"You think?" Aoi said, cocking her head. "She likes teasing people and can be a little imp, but she's a cheerful and energetic girl."

Now it was my turn to cock my head.

"Cheerful...? And energetic...?"

"Well, unlike me, she's pretty bad at sports and really smart, so in that sense, we're, like, total opposites," Aoi added, laughing it off before suddenly looking serious. "From yesterday's meeting, all I got to hear was that they weren't involved in Fort Tilia's attack... Give it to me straight. Is Majima-senpai trustworthy? Is Mana okay?"

Tension ran through the air, revealing a glimpse of the Stalwart Snow White. Out of the exploration team members, she boasted the most monster kills in close-quarters combat. All I could see on her face now, though, was concern for her friend. That was why I answered in as gentle a voice as I could manage.

"Relax. I hate Majima, but I think we can trust him."

I recalled Majima's desperation when he tried to save Lily. When it came to his family, he was a gutsy boy who'd risk his life to protect them. We had only been together for a few days, but I could tell that Majima cherished Katou.

I wondered why he treated a human girl, who wasn't his servant or anything

special, like that...but I guessed that they'd gone through many things during their journey. As for Katou...she was head over heels for him. She was very clearly in love. I honestly had no idea what could have made her fall for him, but they did say that everyone had their own tastes. In any case, no matter what happened, Majima would never bring harm to her.

"We can trust Majima-senpai, right?" Aoi asked again, staring at me intently.

"I think so," I said with a big nod. "But I hate him."

"Do you really hafta add that?" Aoi said, her serious expression crumbling with an astonished smile. "Hmm. I kinda wanna meet him now."

"Aoi," Ishida called from behind her.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Aoi replied as she pouted.

"Aoi, take care of the exploration team for me," I said, giving her small shoulder a slap. "We'll meet again in Nourias."

With that, I once more left the exploration team behind.

Chapter 21: A Second Visit to Town

After our unexpected encounter with the Misty Lodge, our group was now all back together. We descended the Kitrus Mountains and headed once more to Diospyro. Even though we'd already gotten the runestone we needed from there, we were revisiting the town because it was a stopover on the way to Shiran and Kei's hometown.

We arrived according to schedule. Our goal was to resupply and offer our thanks to the former Alliance Knight Adolf for helping us get a runestone the last time we were here. Unlike when we stayed in the suburbs of Serrata, we couldn't possibly rent an entire house, so we'd left Gerbera and Ayame to watch the manamobile while we handled things in town, since they couldn't afford to be seen.

Much like last time, Shiran, Kei, Katou, and Rose accompanied me. Lily wanted to come with us, but since she could fight while maintaining a human form, I asked her to stay behind with the manamobile too, just in case.

Once we entered Diospyro, we immediately made an appointment with Adolf. He told us that he was a little busy today, so he'd rather we come tomorrow. He'd also been busy the last time we came, so this wasn't unexpected. We got a room at an inn and decided to start by resupplying.

The following morning, I found myself alone in one of the inn's rooms with Shiran. We'd rented two rooms here. My guard Rose, her friend Katou, and I shared one room. Shiran and Kei shared the other. Everyone else was currently in the other room while Shiran taught me how to handle spirits until our appointment with Adolf.

The process for activating spiritual magic differed a little from normal magic. In principle, a caster could only use one magic at a time. That was because they could only construct a single glyph at a time. Spiritual magic was a different matter, though. The spirit constructed the glyph, leaving the caster to construct their own glyph independent of the spirit. That was how spiritualists could wield

multiple magics at once.

However, the spirit just made the glyph. The mana still came from the spiritualist themselves. In short, it was like adding faucets to the same water tank. The spiritualist wouldn't need to construct the glyph, but they still had to deliver their mana to the spirit. That was the technique I was currently learning.

"Are you ready, Takahiro? Please focus your senses."

I sat across from Shiran, my hand held out on top of a small table. She took my hand and got to work. Using the same trick Katou used to learn magic—through touch—I could cultivate my ability to sense the flow of mana to the spirit. I could sense the mana flowing from Shiran to her happy-go-lucky dancing spirit.

At the same time...I felt how *cold* Shiran's hand was. All life in her body had come to a stop, so she generated no heat. Obviously, this drained my body temperature when I touched her. Not that I really felt anything out of place about it. Rose was made of wood, so she didn't generate heat either. Her hand simply felt cold.

"We should get going soon."

After about an hour, around the time Shiran's hand had warmed up from my touch, my training ended.

"I must say, you improve very quickly, Takahiro. I'm impressed," Shiran said with a delighted smile, perhaps feeling like a teacher proud of their student.

"Well, more than half of it is exactly the same as what I've been doing already," I said.

According to Shiran, after a spiritualist formed a contract with a spirit, they usually spent around half a year to a year learning how to get their spirit to use magic for them. Even Shiran, who was considerably talented, had taken three months to reach that stage.

For all that, a good seventy percent of that time was spent feeling for the connection with the spirit and heightening one's sensitivity to that sensation. When I contracted with Salvia, I'd found that the connection with a spirit was

much like my connection to my servants through the mental path. I'd already spent the last four months getting used to this sensation, so I didn't need training to sense it. I'd also already increased my sensitivity by training with Asarina to communicate through the mental path without speaking, so that we could act in concert.

It was fortunate that the senses and techniques a spiritualist used were very similar to those I used as a monster tamer. It was also a little amusing. In any case, since I could already do those things, the only thing I had to learn was how to send my mana to the spirit. I was grateful that Shiran had agreed to teach this to me.

After I made a contract with Salvia in the Misty Lodge's world, I'd told Shiran and Kei that spirits and monsters were fundamentally the same beings. If I hadn't told them, then it wouldn't have made sense for me to ask Shiran to teach me how to use a spirit so that I could use the Misty Lodge's power.

Sadly, this truth was devastating for elves. Shiran hadn't been able to hide her shock. And, of course, Kei had also been shocked. But as Kei sat down in a daze, Gerbera had peered in behind her and asked, "Is that some kind of problem?" Following that, Ayame had crawled on top of Kei's knees and licked her chin. Kei had yelped and blinked as if waking up from a bad dream. She'd looked up at Gerbera, then hugged the little blowfox on her lap and laughed, saying, "I guess it isn't."

Her smile at the time left quite the impression on me. I remembered how depressed she'd been when the child from that reclamation village at the entrance of the Kitrus Mountains had pointed out that her ears resembled a monster's. Kei had an inferiority complex about her race, so spending time with my servants, who were quite different from humans, had definitely been a good influence on her.

By the time Kei recovered, Shiran had also overcome her shock and forced a smile. After that, she'd gladly accepted my request to guide me in the ways of a spiritualist.

"I must say, it's rather strange that I am teaching you this, Takahiro," Shiran commented.

“How so?”

“The Misty Lodge is far more ancient than the legendary Great White Spider. Her elaborate use of mana, capable of fabricating another world, clearly classifies her as a grand spirit. That is to say, you’ve established a contract with a grand spirit, so you’re a spiritualist to be celebrated in legends now,” she said in an uncharacteristically joking manner. “So to have a humble spiritualist like me guiding you seems somewhat absurd, doesn’t it?”

“Stop that. I’m nothing like a legendary spiritualist,” I replied with a frown.

“My apologies. I took my joke too far,” she said with a giggle.

I forced a smile, then asked, “By the way, you mentioned grand spirits. Do they exist?” I looked at Shiran’s contracted spirit. “I’ve been wondering for a while now. The spirits you’re contracted to are sprites, right? Does that mean there are other types?”

“There are. Come to think of it, I’ve never explained it. Immediately after they form a contract, spirits are called sprites. From there, after several decades, when they are charged with far more power, they become full-fledged spirits. Elves have very long lifespans, so in the past, there were many who had contracts with true spirits. At present, there are pretty much no such spiritualists or spirits, so the term is used more broadly.”

“How come there are so few?”

“This world is too harsh, so those with a talent for battle cannot stay idle. As a result, many die at a young age. Not that elves are unique in this regard.”

Even though their lifespans were longer than those of normal humans, it didn’t change anything if they died young. These words felt especially heavy coming from someone who’d already died.

“The term grand spirit is used to refer to the Spirit of Origins that appears in the elven legend, *The First Spiritualist*.”

“An elven legend? Does it have anything to do with saviors?”

“It doesn’t. Elves do not appear in the savior legends, but we do have tales of our own. *The First Spiritualist* is one of them. It is said that, on their deathbed,

the one who formed a contract with the Spirit of Origins asked it to watch over the fate of all elves. Ever since then, elves have been able to form contracts with spirits.”

“Hmm. That’s a neat story.”

Now that I thought about it, it did seem a little strange that only elves could form contracts with spirits. According to this legend, an elf with a unique ability showed up and became the first spiritualist. When he entrusted their race to the spirit, they all gained the privilege to form contracts. That is, if the legends were true, at least.

After thinking it over, I returned my gaze to Shiran and watched her for a short while. Her eye then met mine, and she stared back at me blankly.

“Takahiro?” At times like these, I could really see the blood relation between her and Kei through her expression. “What is it? Is there something on my face?”

“No. Ummm... Not your face.”

She looked bewildered. I scratched my cheek, wondering how she hadn’t noticed. It was a little awkward, but I had to point it out. I lowered my eyes to the table, where she still firmly held my hand with hers.

“Practice is over, so, um, your hand...”

“Ah.”

Though our practice had ended, Shiran had been gripping my hand the entire time we’d been talking about spirits.

“Forgive me,” she said, letting go.

She didn’t jerk her hand back. Instead, she kept a light hold on my hand and slowly pulled away. Her fingers slid across the back of mine. To me, it looked like there was longing and regret in that gesture.

“Well then. I’m going to head out to see Adolf,” she said, lightly clenching that same hand and standing up as if nothing had happened.

“Okay, I guess I’ll head over to see the others,” I replied, following her out of the room and into the corridor.

“I believe I should be back just past noon.”

“Got it. Thanks for today.”

“It was nothing. Then, excuse me.”

Shiran turned her back to me and walked off briskly. Even after I could no longer see her, I remained standing in the hallway for a while.



I looked out vacantly from a second-story window of the inn at the alley below, completely absorbed in my own thoughts. My mind was stuck on Shiran’s behavior right before she left to see Adolf.

I’d already felt something was off before this. Perhaps I’d started sensing it during that time in the Misty Lodge’s world. That world had the power to turn dreams into reality, and on that last night, Salvia had told me, “You, Mana, Ayame, and Kei didn’t change at all.”

Conversely, that meant everyone else, including Shiran, had changed. During our stay there, I’d ended up peeping on Shiran and Kei during their training. To be more precise, Salvia had arranged for me to see it. She’d gone out of her way to trick Shiran’s spirit so that I could watch them. That was because I’d mistaken Salvia’s glamor for an attack, and she had wanted to show me a scene where the mist turned a wish into reality, as proof of her lack of hostility.

To put it another way, that scene was only possible because of Salvia’s intervention, meaning Shiran couldn’t hug Kei in reality. When I thought of it like that, I realized something.

Outside the world of the Misty Lodge, I’d never seen Shiran and Kei’s skin come into contact. At the very least, I couldn’t remember a single instance of it happening. Kei kept a relatively small distance between herself and others, partly because she was still young. She’d tugged on my arm and even pressed against my chest several times now. Shiran was much closer to Kei than I was, and yet I’d never seen the two of them touch.

Had she skillfully been avoiding this? This didn’t only apply to Kei either. Shiran avoided touching anyone else. Lately, I was the one and only exception to this, so that she could teach me how to use a spirit. That was likely because

she had no way of avoiding it. Nobody else could teach me what I needed to learn, after all.

I could guess why she was avoiding touching anyone. I recalled the coldness against my palm. Her body was that of the dead, having lost all heat. Even though Shiran acknowledged herself as a knight—as a sword and shield meant to protect humanity—she was not in fact made of cold steel. She was definitely distraught about her body's current state.

If so, what would be the best thing for me to do? My belief was that she was worried about her undead body and didn't want to touch others. She'd touched me because she was the only one who could fulfill my request, but if she really hated the idea...maybe I should reconsider taking lessons from her. It would slow down my progress, but I didn't want to learn this stuff so badly that I had to hurt her for it.

There was a complication, however. Shiran also gave off the impression that she didn't dislike it. I recalled her gesture from just moments ago. If she'd truly hated it, wouldn't she have pulled her hand back right away? I didn't have any positive proof, of course. Honestly, I couldn't imagine Shiran's current mental state. What thoughts went through someone's head when they could no longer touch anyone, but then gained the opportunity to do so once more, even if forced to?

"This is a tough problem..."

I didn't have enough facts to make a decision yet. Even if I were to stop our lessons, I needed a good excuse. If she found out I was doing it out of consideration, it could further damage that frailty in her heart. Actually, it was possible that telling her that she shouldn't worry about her body would have the opposite effect. For the time being, I had no choice but to wait and see which way the dice fell while I thought of an excuse to stop our lessons.

"Is something the matter, Master?" Rose asked, bringing me back from my thoughts. Kei and Katou were also in the room and turned toward me. "Is there something troubling you?"

She had evidently heard me muttering to myself. I told her it was nothing and returned my gaze to the window.

“Oh.”

I spotted Shiran outside. It looked like she was on her way back from seeing Adolf. She was still a distance away, but she managed to spot me as well. She smiled, her expression half-covered by her eyepatch. But then she immediately withdrew her smile. Someone had blocked her path—a boy with black hair.

“That’s...”

I couldn’t see his face because he had his back turned to me, but I knew who it was based on his stature.

“Master, isn’t that...?”

“Yeah.”

It was the visitor we’d met the last time we were in Diospyro. The first time had been in the inn’s lobby, and the second while I was on my date with Rose. If I recalled correctly, his name was Fukatsu Aketora. I could also see the young man wearing the native clothing of northern Aker, Thaddeus.

Fukatsu had apparently called Shiran to a stop. They seemed to be talking about something, but I couldn’t hear from this distance. Still, I could tell right away that they were having some kind of dispute. I couldn’t stay here. I immediately dashed for the door.

“Senpai!”

“Katou, wait here with Kei. Rose, come with me,” I said.

“Right away,” Rose replied, immediately following me out of the room.

I suppressed the impatience swelling within me and ran out of the inn.

Chapter 22: Identified on Sight

Fortunately, by the time I got down to the alley, the situation hadn't changed much from when I was looking out the window. There was nobody in sight aside from Shiran, Fukatsu Aketora, and Thaddeus. It looked like a seldom-used path to begin with.

The sound of me slamming the door open to get there resounded through the quiet alley. Fukatsu's blood was running to his head, and he was too busy quarreling with Shiran to notice, whereas Thaddeus appeared to have heard me, being somewhat closer to the door.

The young man wearing a loosely draped cloth over his torso stopped mediating between the two and turned my way. He also seemed to remember me. He watched me running over, glanced at Rose...then turned to me once more, his eyes wide and his expression stiff. His befuddled state irritated me. I had no idea what had him so shocked, but Shiran and Fukatsu were still quarreling. As his travel companion, it was Thaddeus's responsibility to stop them. There was no point in complaining about that, though, so I gritted my teeth and quickened my pace.

"Why do you want to know that?!"

"I'm tellin' ya I got reasons, dammit!"

At this distance, I could hear them clearly now.

"It ain't all that complicated! Just answer my damn questions! That's all you gotta do!"

It looked like Fukatsu was trying to get something out of Shiran, but she was refusing to comply, which had led to the current argument. I'd been under the impression that he'd come to pick a fight because she was my acquaintance, but that didn't appear to be the case.

What could a visitor like Fukatsu possibly want from Shiran? I started to wonder, but regardless of the reason, I had to go help her first. Just as I took in

a breath to call them out, Fukatsu snapped.

“Enough already! Just tell me what I wanna know!”

He closed in on Shiran and tried to grab her arm. His violent approach seemed to be fueled by the blood rushing to his head. Shiran looked like she was going to deal with it. She had once faced down another cheater, Juumonji Tatsuya. Even if this wasn't the midst of battle and she didn't have the spirits' support, her opponent wasn't seriously attacking her. Moreover, he was lunging at her without any composure. Shiran had been ready for anything to happen, so even if this was a sudden event, she had the means to deal with it. That should have been the case, anyway.

However, Shiran wasn't the same as when she was in her prime. She'd told me that her condition had deteriorated. Her combat potential had once been on par with Gerbera, but she'd since fallen to somewhere around Rose's level. Even though that classified her as plenty strong in this world, she was poorly matched against a cheater.

Shiran couldn't twist her body away fast enough, and Fukatsu managed to roughly grab her forearm.

“I'm tellin' ya to— Huh?” Fukatsu started to say something but suddenly swallowed his words. “What the...?”

I couldn't see his face from where I was, but I could hear the suspicion in his voice. He lowered his gaze to the arm he was grasping.

“Cold...?”

Shiran's face spasmed. In that instant, a fire ignited within me.

“Fukatsu!” I roared at the top of my lungs.

That finally caught his attention. Fukatsu turned in shock at the sudden noise. As he did, Rose and I ran all the way up to him. There was no time to catch my breath. I came to a stop and immediately spoke.

“Let her go, Fukatsu.”

He looked thoroughly displeased at the intrusion. “The hell do I hafta listen to —”

“Let her go,” I said again in a deep voice.

My mind was seething with violent emotions for the first time in a while. Even so, I just managed to maintain my composure. If I were to draw my sword here, Rose would certainly join the fray. Nonetheless, it would still be considerably difficult for us to handle a cheater. If it came to it, I wouldn't hesitate, but this wasn't the time to place my hand on my sword's hilt.

“Let her go,” I repeated once more.

When I last met him, Fukatsu Aketora seemed to hate me. Yet when we first met at the inn, he'd seemed utterly disinterested. It was more like he hadn't wanted to get involved in anything troublesome. Even if he couldn't be called friendly by any metric, he hadn't been hostile toward us. He'd only started to show disgust on our second encounter...when he bumped into Rose and me while we were walking around town.

“In any case, this guy's proolly trash just like the rest of 'em. Draggin' a buncha chicks around like trophies is proof of that.”

I didn't think of them like that or treat them like that, so it didn't feel good to be misunderstood in that way. Still, I could understand his disdain. At the very least, he had enough dignity to find people like that unpleasant. He was rough around the edges, but he wasn't a prideless outlaw. As such, it would be rash of him to draw his sword here too.

“Tch.”

After he stared me down for a bit, Fukatsu let go of Shiran's arm. She immediately pulled back from him and staggered.

“Takahiro...” she said, her single blue eye looking at me frailly.

“Are you all right, Shiran?” I asked, ignoring Fukatsu and walking up to her.

“T-Takahiro. I'm so sorry for causing you trouble...”

She was clearly shaken. She was claspng the arm that Fukatsu had grabbed. This seemed to be an unconscious act. Shiran being an undead monster was one of the biggest secrets our group was keeping, and this event could expose that. She wasn't afraid of Fukatsu's actions; she was afraid of causing us

trouble. I knew full well that that was the type of girl she was.

“It’s not your fault, Shiran.”

She’d been unlucky to get involved with a cheater here. Nothing could be done about that. It was merely a natural disaster. At the same time, it was also fortunate that he was a visitor. Fukatsu Aketora didn’t know what was considered common sense in this world. So long as he didn’t know any other elves, he would have no way of knowing whether they just had a different body temperature from normal. He also didn’t know that I had the power to tame monsters.

He’d been surprised by how cold she was and maybe found that suspicious, but it would be highly unlikely that he’d come up with the ludicrous idea that she was an undead monster.

“Let’s go back, Shiran,” I said in a sharp tone.

“R-Right.”

Shiran nodded, but her stride was uncharacteristically timid. Her self-condemning thoughts had completely seized her.

“Hey! Wait up!” Fukatsu yelled, irritated.

If I were pushed to say it, it seemed like he was angry at being ignored, but Shiran didn’t take it that way. Her pale face stiffened considerably. Seeing this, my mind wandered to the night of the commander’s arrest.

“Is this really fine?”

“If my identity is discovered, it will cause you trouble.”

That night, Shiran had seemed so frail that it felt like she would suddenly vanish the moment I took my eyes off of her. She was giving off the same impression now. I knew right away that things couldn’t be left like this.

“Ah.”

Stimulated by that compulsion, I unconsciously pulled Shiran into a side embrace. Half of this was because I felt that she would vanish if I didn’t hold her, and the other half was because I wanted to protect her.

Fortunately, Shiran didn't reject me. On the contrary, she leaned in against me. She muttered quietly and hid herself using my body. Her stiff hands clung tightly to me. Encouraged by the fact that she was relying on me, I turned to Fukatsu once more.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I don't want nothin' from you," he answered, his face like that of a snarling beast.

I wouldn't have made it through so many life-or-death situations if that was all it took to scare me.

"You really think I'll back down just because of that? Can't you tell she's scared?" I said. Shiran wasn't actually scared of Fukatsu, but I didn't really have a reason to tell him what really had her frightened. "If you have something to say, then come back after you cool off."

"That's not gonna fly," he said, showing no signs of backing down. I scowled at his unexpectedly persistent attitude, but his next words made me feel the slightest bit of concern. "We've got our own shit goin' on too."

His voice was a little quieter, perhaps because he'd managed to cool his head a little because of our interruption. There was an earnest ring to it now. For the first time since I got here, I took a proper look at Fukatsu's face.

"I can't possibly back down, man," he said, desperation flickering in and out on his sharp features. I could tell by his expression that there was a good reason for this. "We gotta hear about the Royal Army's plan for a monster subjugation operation, and that woman knows about it."

"An operation?"

I felt the urge to turn and look at Shiran, but I stopped myself from doing so at the last second. I had to act appropriately to get through this. Shiran wasn't the person I needed confirmation from right now.

"And why do you think Shiran knows about this?" I asked.

"Don't play dumb," Fukatsu snarled, baring his teeth. "That woman is a big ol' knight in that Alliance order or whatever, right? I saw her comin' out of an army

building in town. I've already found out that they're plannin' a large-scale operation nearby. She's gonna be lendin' them a hand, yeah? If so, she's gotta know the details."

His logic did make sense, but even though I thought that, I kept it from showing on my face.

"So? Why do you want to know about it?" I asked.

"I...can't say," he answered, biting down on his lip impatiently. "I've got reasons I can't talk about."

"Then it's out of the question. Do you really think you can get what you want like that?"

"I've gotta know!"

He appeared to understand how unreasonable he was being. Nevertheless, he had no intention of backing down.

I had a general grasp of the situation now. I wasn't sure what exactly a monster subjugation operation entailed, but I'd heard about eyewitness accounts of monsters near the neighboring villages. The army was probably preparing to deal with it.

Considering Shiran's personality, if such an operation was going on, it was highly likely that Adolf had told her about it during their meeting so that she could provide advice, and if necessary, lend a hand. However, Shiran refused to tell Fukatsu about it.

That made perfect sense. Adolf had talked to her about it precisely because she could be trusted. She couldn't possibly blab about it to someone she didn't even know, especially when that person refused to tell her his reasons.

The problem was that Fukatsu was well aware that his request was unreasonable. He wasn't so stupid or arrogant that he wouldn't realize it. Despite this, he'd gone as far as grabbing Shiran's arm to try and get this information from her. It didn't seem like he would give up over a half-hearted reason either. What drove him so far?

Regardless, now wasn't really the time to be thinking of all this. I inhaled and

spoke to him once more.

“Sorry, but I don’t think Shiran knows what you want to find out.”

“The hell are you—?!”

“We didn’t come here to help with any subjugation or the like. She simply went to that building to greet them in the middle of our journey.”

That was the truth. Fukatsu was under the impression that Shiran had come to this town as an Alliance Knight in the middle of a large-scale monster subjugation operation to lend a hand, but that wasn’t the case at all.

“We’ll be leaving town tomorrow,” I added.

“Liar. I’m not gonna let ya off with those half-assed excuses.”

“If you doubt us, then you’re free to follow us. You can go do some sightseeing at the reclamation village we’re heading to.”

Fukatsu’s conjecture was incorrect. At the very least, his basis for believing it was off the mark. In truth, his conclusion that Shiran had heard about the plans could be right, even if only by coincidence, but he had no way of confirming that. Even if he planned on persevering here until his unreasonable demand was met, nothing would come of it if Shiran didn’t actually know anything.

“If that’s all, we’re leaving,” I said, turning on my heel after I’d confirmed that Fukatsu had lost all his vigor.

“Hang—”

“Do you still need something?” I cut him off coldly. “If not, we’re taking our leave.”

Fukatsu was at a loss for words. I turned away from him and walked off, still holding Shiran’s shoulder. I was relieved that he didn’t try to say anything else. I didn’t think he was crazy enough to run wild in the middle of town, but a conversation with someone I could only run away from if it came to a fight still had me tense.

In spite of everything, it looked like I’d managed to get by without anything serious happening. I looked up, spotting Katou and Kei looking down from the window. I gave them a signal that everything was okay, then turned to Shiran.

“That was quite the disaster. Are you all right, Shiran?”

She'd been thoroughly shaken earlier. I wanted to support her as much as I could before we moved somewhere she could relax and calm down. With that in mind, I looked at Shiran's face up close—and saw something unexpected.

“Ah... Uhh?” she murmured, looking right back at me with a melted stare.

“Huh?”

I stiffened at the surprise attack. Her face was usually taut, the very definition of stern, but now it looked completely bewitched, as if in a delirium. However, there was no red tinge to her cheeks, so it gave her a peculiarly erotic atmosphere.

It felt like my soul was a captive of her gaze. It was like my brain was going numb. Even with my thoughts slowed, I realized I'd seen this once before, but before I could remember when, a loud voice struck my ear.

“Wait! Please!”

The shrill voice brought Shiran's hazy expression back to normal and pulled my consciousness back to reality. I reflexively put myself on guard and turned around. The one who yelled at us...wasn't the persistent Fukatsu.

“Please, wait.”

It was Thaddeus, who hadn't so much as reacted the entire time we'd been talking. He looked at me with a strange fervor in his eyes.

“It shouldn't be. It's impossible. But I can't think of anything else...” he muttered.

“Thaddeus?” Fukatsu said in bewilderment. This was apparently unexpected behavior from his traveling companion.

Thaddeus's expression turned terribly serious as he walked my way with uncertain steps, his mind too preoccupied with something else entirely. It was a little bizarre.

“Hey, Thaddeus? What's up with you?” Fukatsu asked.

“Maybe, just maybe... If it's really the case...”

He ignored Fukatsu and the obvious agitation on my face as he stretched his hand toward me. I couldn't read his intentions at all and was totally absorbed in his movements, so I reacted a little late.

"What...*are* you...?" Thaddeus mumbled.

The moment before his hand reached me, something cut in between us.

"You'll come no closer."

It was a black bardiche. The sturdy half-moon blade shone dangerously and threatened Thaddeus.

"If you try to do something to my master, I'll be forced to deal with you appropriately," Rose said forcefully, holding her large ax in her hand.

As one would expect, Thaddeus backed off. If he were to do anything suspicious, she would mow him down.

"R-Right... Forgive me."

Thaddeus groaned and took one, then two steps back.

"Aketora, don't move. That was my fault," he said to the seething Fukatsu, then turned back to me. "My apologies. I was so surprised that I ended up doing something rather rude. Please forgive me, and please excuse Aketora's impolite behavior."

He came back to his senses, and his face regained its calm demeanor.

"I won't come any closer, so let me ask you one thing," he continued. "What's your name...? Oh, no, you don't need to tell me that. I'm well aware that you're wary of us, especially with this recent incident."

"What's your question?" I urged him on. I was, of course, still on guard.

Thaddeus slid his hand into his clothes. He then held out his other hand to Rose, who was still in a low stance ready to strike, to show her that he wasn't being hostile. After that, he slowly took his hand out of his clothes, making sure not to alarm us, then showed us his palm. He held a white jewel in his hand that gave off a faint light from the inside.

The moment I saw it, I felt a throbbing deep behind my right eye. For a

second, I thought we were under some kind of attack, but Rose and Shiran didn't react. The throbbing subsided quickly, though.

Thaddeus began talking. "This is a treasure passed down among my clan, given to us by a certain great lady. It's a magic tool of the highest class."

His tone was calm and serious. His gaze was fixed on my eye—just my right eye. It was as if simply looking there made everything obvious to him.

"Do you perhaps know of a monster called the Misty Lodge?" he asked.

It was practically a miracle that I didn't react in some way. The legend of the Misty Lodge was well known. But Thaddeus had called the Misty Lodge a monster. That wasn't common knowledge. That was to say nothing of asking her contractor of such details. How could I possibly remain calm? If I hadn't steeled myself for any question beforehand, it would surely have shown on my face. I didn't know whether Rose or Shiran managed to get by without reacting. It took me everything I had just to keep my own agitation suppressed. I didn't have the leisure to check on them.

"What's that...?" I barely managed to say, keeping my unrest from showing.

This was different from Shiran's altercation with Fukatsu. Thaddeus knew of the monster known as the Misty Lodge and suspected me of being related to her in some way using an unknown method. He'd driven me into a really bad corner.

That was why I felt a little relieved when Thaddeus said, "I see. That was a strange question. Sorry." However, his next words came with no pause, and they heightened the tension once more. "You're obviously trying to deceive me."

"I'm not trying to—"

"Sorry, please wait," Thaddeus said, cutting me off and holding out his empty hand. "That was my fault again. I'm sure it's inconvenient to have this truth exposed. It's a matter of course for me to open up to you first."

Thaddeus's words were wrapped in mystery, but Fukatsu seemed to know what he was getting at.

“H-Hey. Thaddeus, don’t tell me you’re gonna...?”

After he smiled at the surprised boy, Thaddeus turned back my way, pulled back his left hand, and put it against his face.

“I’d like you to take this as a token of my sincerity,” he said.

I could see the apprehension in his expression. I had no idea what he was going to do. Thaddeus was hiding the left side of his face with his hand. He brought his head a little closer to us without alarming Rose. He then moved his hand a tiny bit so that only we could see behind it.

“Wha—?!”

I was speechless. Thaddeus’s eye wasn’t that of a gentle young man. The area around his left eye was covered in ocher scales. And that wasn’t all. His gaping eye socket housed an eyeball much like a lizard’s, its inhuman pupil reflecting our astonished figures.

“No way, are you...?” I started, but I couldn’t speak the words that came after that.

Seeing us at such a loss, Thaddeus smiled.

“Could you please listen to our story?”



Extra Story: Mana's Home Cooking *Katou Mana's* *POV*

After I saw Majima-senpai and Rose off for their date in town, I lay down in my bed back in the inn. I was listening to the hustle and bustle of the outside leaking in through the window when I heard stark steps walking down the hallway.

"Haah..." I felt slightly nauseous, and my heart felt a little heavy.

As I let out a sigh, a knock came from the door. I jolted on reflex.

"Mana, I brought you food," a familiar voice said from the other side.

"Thanks, Kei. I'm opening it now," I replied with relief, getting out of bed.

I pulled back the latch and welcomed her in. She was holding a tray with both hands that had two portions of lunch on it. The inn provided meals, so we could eat in our rooms.

"Sorry for making you bring it all the way here," I said.

"It's fine. I don't mind at all."

"Anyways, I didn't think I'd really end up feeling sick..."

"How's your appetite?"

"It's not so bad that I can't eat. I'm not really feeling out of sorts either."

That was the truth. I actually knew the exact reason for my poor condition. It wasn't a problem related to my body; it was purely an emotional problem. I had yet to completely overcome my fear of men. Even now, Majima-senpai always paid attention to my needs, and although it was for a short time, even Kaneki-senpai had helped with my rehabilitation. I'd been trying hard on my own as well. As a result, so long as Majima-senpai or Rose was with me, I could somehow go outside among a crowd of people. However, walking around Diospyro had still put a burden on me. Because of that, the moment Majima-

senpai and Rose were no longer with me, I had a small relapse.

“I’m okay. I’m just feeling a little sluggish,” I told Kei. I was still in pain, but I didn’t want to worry her too much. “I just need to rest before our journey, and I need nutrition. Come on, let’s eat.”

I walked over to the table. Kei had brought something like vegetables and mincemeat wrapped in spiced bread. This was a common meal in Aker, so it was everywhere, from street stalls to restaurants. The springy texture of the bread somewhat resembled mochi, so I liked it.

As I ate, I recalled the pair I’d sent off earlier in the morning.

“I suppose Rose is enjoying her time alone with Senpai right now.”

“Nom. Nom... She really put in a whole lot of effort, huh?” Kei said after chewing down her mouthful of meat.

The growing little girl really did eat a lot—her meal was about twice the size of mine. Perhaps it was because she often exercised so she could one day become a knight.

“You also helped her out a bunch, right?” she asked.

“I didn’t do much. Besides, I’m only here now because of Rose. This is nothing compared to that.”

Had Rose not given me a push back at Fort Tilia, I probably wouldn’t be accompanying Majima-senpai on his journey. If that had been the case, I would’ve definitely gone with the other students to the imperial capital along with the Imperial Knights.

Crossing the abandoned mountain range, falling off a cliff during Iino’s attack, risking my life in the battle against the Mad Beast—none of that would’ve happened. I would’ve been treated courteously as another savior.

Regardless, I was glad I could accompany Majima-senpai’s group like this. I wanted to be with him, and I didn’t want to be separated from Rose. So long as we could stay like this, I could ask for nothing more.

“The rest is up to Rose,” I stated. “But I think she’ll be fine. I gave her some advice too.”

“Advice... Oh! Operation Lovey-Dovey Cuddle!”

Kei pitched forward in excitement. Curiosity and bashfulness dyed her cheeks pink. Even though she aimed to be a knight dedicated to battle, she was still a growing girl who had an interest in this kind of thing. She was different from Shiran in this sense, even though they both had serious personalities. When I was giving Rose advice for her date, Kei had listened intently off to the side. Incidentally, I didn’t remember giving it that operation name. It did express the plan to the letter, though.

“They really were amazing, huh?” Kei said. “She let me touch them just a bit, but it really had my heart pounding.”

I forced a smile as Kei blushed.

“Well, we did put in a lot of work to get there. Both Rose...and me...” I mumbled.

I felt my hand unconsciously reaching for my chest, but I clenched it and brought it to a stop.

“Oh. Right. She used you as reference, didn’t she?” Kei asked, clapping her hands together.

I nodded ambiguously back to her. “Well, yes. She did.”

I could feel a little prickle of heat in the corner of my eyes. I hadn’t disliked helping Rose with that matter in any way, but it had, in fact, been quite the ordeal. I felt like I had lost something...or was really close to awakening to something. I tried not to think about it too deeply. I gazed off into the distance as Kei’s eyebrows drooped.

“But Rose seemed like she was hesitating a little, didn’t she? I hope it goes well.”

“It’ll be fine,” I told her reassuringly. “When push comes to shove, Rose won’t cower in fear. She was pretty bewildered, though.”

Recalling Rose’s innocent and cute expression as she’d panicked about this made me smile and unintentionally giggle. The fact that I could smile now was also thanks to the conviction she harbored in her strong heart.

“As long as someone gives her a push on the back, I know she’ll manage one way or another,” I said.

“You really do cherish Rose, huh?” Kei replied, looking at me as if I were too dazzling for her eyes. “You’re kind of like her mom.”

“Her mom?”

My eyes went wide at the unexpected statement. To a typical high school student, parenthood was something far in the future. The same applied to me. When I saw such scenes in dramas, books, or manga, I vaguely wondered if I would be like that one day. That was all. That far-off future seemed like somebody else’s problem entirely.

“Me? A mom...?” Even as I said it aloud, it didn’t feel real. I couldn’t even imagine myself becoming one. “I guess I’ll need to polish up my household skills a bit more...” I said, looking down at the meal in front of me and smiling bitterly. “Like, I mean, I’m not really good at cooking or anything.”

I was implicitly denying what Kei had said, but this just excited her more.

“In that case, I’ll teach you!” she exclaimed.

“Kei...?”

“Ooh, why didn’t I ever think of this? We’re finally back in Aker, so I know a few recipes we can use here that my aunty taught me!”

Kei was thirty percent cuter than usual with this sparkle in her eyes. As the youngest member of our group, she was usually the one being taken care of. She looked very happy and excited to be able to teach something to someone else.

“Is that so? That might be nice,” I said.

I’d found it a little questionable at first, but after thinking it over, Kei’s proposal wasn’t a bad idea. During our journey, Lily was in charge of preparing our meals, but I wouldn’t lose anything by learning a little. If we ended up settling down in Aker, we’d have to learn how to cook the local cuisine, so it was also a good plan for the future. Furthermore, I couldn’t bring myself to disappoint Kei when she looked like she was having so much fun.

“Okay then, can you teach me?”

“Yes!” Kei nodded energetically and then hopped up from her chair. “Now that it’s decided, we need ingredients. I’ll be right back!”

“Ah! Wait a sec, Kei! You don’t need to hurry that much!” I yelled quickly, managing to stop her before she ran off. “We’re still in the middle of lunch. Besides, if you’re going to go shopping, we should inform everyone else first.”

“Oh, you’re right. How careless of me,” Kei said with a surprised look, her hand on the doorknob.

Kei grinned, looking embarrassed, and returned to her seat. Her flustered behavior that we got to see every now and then always worried Shiran. In Shiran’s defense, I did find it hard to take my eyes off Kei when she was like this. Still, this was one of her cute points.

“I’m really looking forward to it,” she said after sitting back down, making no attempt to hide her excitement in the least. “I hope Takahiro gets back soon.”

She reached for her meal again, then came to a complete stop.

“Huh? But now that I think of it...” she said, her blue eyes glancing my way awkwardly. “Um, Mana? There’s something I just noticed. About Takahiro...or rather, about Operation Lovey-Dovey Cuddle.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Rose’s breasts are a reproduction of yours, right?”

“They are. What about them?”

“If she cuddles up against him like that, won’t the, um...size...and sensation...and stuff be the same? Wouldn’t it be practically identical to having your breasts pressing against him?”

“Oh...”

The bread in my hand plopped back down onto my plate.



Two days later, during the evening, I prepared for cooking lessons from Kei, just as promised. We were in a village close to Diospyro, the same village we’d

visited several days ago. This second visit from Shiran, the famous lieutenant of the Alliance Knights, had delighted all the villagers. They'd even gone out of their way to prepare a vacant house for us.

"Okay, Mana. Shall we begin?" Kei asked, clenching her fists.

She had plenty of motivation, and her inspired state made me smile.

Rose then came in with a leather bag. "I've brought it, Mana, Kei."

"Thank you, R-Rose..."

I'd jolted slightly in the middle of speaking, surprised to see that Majima-senpai was behind her.

"Y-You too, Senpai."

"Don't thank me. I just came to watch..." he said.

When our eyes met, I suddenly felt restless. I reflexively lowered my eyes as if to run away. My cheeks were hot. My fingers couldn't keep still, so I interlaced them in front of my chest. Ever since the other day, I couldn't help but be conscious of him.

I did, of course, know why. Operation Lovey-Dovey Cuddle—that is to say, the plan to link arms with Majima-senpai and press up against him—involved Rose, not me. But even though I knew this, my heart couldn't keep up. Just the thought that he knew now made me completely restless. Also, Majima-senpai had been acting a little strange ever since we'd come back to this village.

I'd found this weird and had tried asking Rose about it. Apparently, she and Majima-senpai had talked all about it being my idea. The moment she told me that, I had put both my hands to my burning cheeks and squatted down. My plan had blown up in my face. I had meant to make Senpai more conscious of Rose—which did succeed—but what was the point of him becoming conscious of me too?

It was embarrassing. Endlessly embarrassing. But it definitely wasn't a bad thing. No. To be honest, it made me a little happy. But the fact that I felt that way was even more embarrassing, and somewhat shameful.

"Mana?" Rose called to me.

“It’s nothing... Let’s start.”

I accepted the leather bag from her and decided to focus on the task in front of me. The bag was filled with yellow flour, the staple food of Aker, the raw ingredient that made that hybrid of bread and mochi.

“This is a little surprising,” I said, looking inside the bag. “I imagined something like wheat flour, but this is pretty different. It’s yellow, and the grains are relatively coarse.”

“They sell finer grains too, but this is what’s commonly used in households,” Kei said.

“Is this made from potatoes?”

“Yes. These.”

Kei pointed at one of the other ingredients Rose had carried in for us earlier. They were long and narrow potatoes. They looked similar to yams, but the skin was more whitish.

“Keep in mind that they’re poisonous if eaten raw. At worst, they can be deadly, so please be careful.”

“Huh?!” I dropped the potato I had picked up.

Hearing the word “poison,” Rose was suddenly on guard.

“Kei, do you eat such dangerous foods?” she asked.

“Hm? Yes. Is there something wrong?” Kei said with a cock of the head. She looked rather confused. “These ones are a type that can be eaten as is, so it’s okay. Oh, but please peel the skin off and remove the core. They’re both poisonous.”

“Is this really all right, Mana?” Rose asked me.

“Well...it should be.”

I was getting a little worried myself, but this was cooking even a child like Kei could do, so there wasn’t any need to be so nervous. In short, it was a difference in common sense.

“I’m sure there isn’t a problem if they’re cooked properly,” I added. “Even

back in our world, there are foods that can be bad for the body if eaten the wrong way.”

“Now that you mention it, we learned in school that potatoes with green skin and their sprouts are poisonous,” Majima-senpai said.

I was a little flustered, but I still nodded back to him. “Soya beans can’t be eaten raw either, and eating raw fish can lead to parasites. I don’t even really need to mention blowfish. None of them are a problem after they’re cooked.”

“Hmm, so even something poisonous can be rendered edible. Is this human wisdom? How interesting,” Rose said, an air of admiration in her voice.

I thought she was exaggerating, but considering how she couldn’t eat, perhaps she found human customs extremely fascinating. Her honest personality tickled my mischievous heart.

“Hee hee. That’s not even the half of it,” I said. “Back in our country, we dare to eat rotten beans.”

“That must be a joke. Even I know that humans will ruin their stomachs if they eat rotten food.”

“It’s true, I’m telling you. The beans get all sticky and stringy. There’s other stuff too. The way they’re made is different, but we eat daikon, eggplant, cucumber, and other such vegetables in the same way.”

I was of course referring to fermented food. If it was useful to people, we called it fermentation. If it caused harm, then we called it putrefaction. The words were different, but both referred to the decomposition of foodstuffs via the action of microbes.

Rose looked unsettled by this. She was likely having trouble figuring out whether I was serious.

“Is this true, Master...?” she asked, turning around to Majima-senpai for an answer.

“Katou’s joking,” he answered with a smile.

“Wuh?!”

“Oh, so it really was a joke,” Rose said, sighing in relief. She was unbelievably

cute, but I still had things to say about this. “Thank goodness. You were giving me the impression that the people of your country are all eccentrics who eat nothing but rotten food.”

“Huh? No, you’ve got it wrong. You’ve got it totally wrong, Rose,” I said in a fluster.

“I’m wrong? About everyone being an eccentric who eats rotten food?”

“N-No. That’s also wrong, but that’s not what I mean.” I didn’t even know what I was saying myself. “H-Hang on a sec. Ummm, Senpai? I’m pretty sure you know, but I’m talking about natto and tsukemono here.”

“Don’t be fooled, Katou. Those aren’t meant for human consumption.”

“Mana was tricked?!” Rose exclaimed. “What craven cur would do such a thing?!”

“Y-You’re wrong! It’s okay! I wasn’t tricked or anything!” I protested.

“You once told me that all people who’ve been tricked say the same thing, Mana,” Rose said in all seriousness.

“I did, but I wasn’t!” I yelled, turning to Majima-senpai. “Actually, Senpai, do you maybe...?”

I glared at him, and he averted his gaze and scratched his cheek. “I’m not good with that stuff...”

“Thought so. Jeez. Please explain it to Rose, okay?”

“I know...”

Majima-senpai obediently complied and gave Rose a simple explanation. She immediately understood since he was the one telling her.

As I watched this, a certain thought came to mind.

“Anyway, that’s a little unexpected. You have food that you’re bad with, Senpai?”

“Well, yeah. I’m still human. If need be, I’ll eat anything, though.”

My association with Majima-senpai had started with a survivalist lifestyle in the Woodlands. Back then, we hadn’t been in a situation to complain about

whatever food we could get. Now was a different story, however.

“Oh yeah, what kind of seasoning would you like for tonight’s dinner, Senpai?” I asked.

“Hm? I have a choice?”

“Salty, sweet, or spicy should be manageable. Oh, maybe it’ll be fun to take on the challenge of making natto or tsukemono here.”

“I’d rather you spared me that,” he said in a relatively serious tone, getting a giggle out of me. “Right then... How about spicy? When I had a similar meal in town, I felt like it was lacking a little punch. I think it should work.”

“Understood. I’ll give it a try. Okay then, shall we start?” I said, turning to Kei.

“Yes, if we don’t start soon, dinner will end up being rather late,” she agreed with a nod.

“Is there anything I can help with?” Majima-senpai asked.

Kei and I exchanged glances.

“We should be fine!” she exclaimed.

“You just relax in your room, Senpai.”

“Sure. In that case, call me if anything happens.” With that, he returned to his room.

After he left, I realized something.

“Huh...?”

I had somehow managed to have a normal conversation with him despite how awkward things had been. It seemed his joke was his way of being considerate of me.

“Is something the matter, Mana?” Rose asked curiously.

“No, it’s nothing.” I smiled and got back to cooking, picking up a potato and a knife. “Thanks for waiting. By the way, Kei, how is this cooked?”

“We can boil it. If we boil it too much, it’ll fall apart, so it can’t be used for soup. For today, how about we boil it and use it as a side dish?”

“Okay.”

I did as I was told and peeled the thick skin off. After quartering it, I removed the core and chopped it up into smaller pieces. Before I came to this world, I hadn't done much cooking, but I'd been helping Lily lately, so I was now somewhat capable with a knife. I finished chopping up the potato into pieces and then added it to the pot of boiling water. The potato heated through easily in small pieces, and I took them out before they crumbled apart. Then I began working on other side dishes.

“Okay. Let's make the filling next. We'll go with mincemeat salad today,” Kei said, taking out some strangely discolored meat from another leather bag.

“That looks a little different from the jerky we've been eating on our journey,” I commented.

“That's normally dried until it's all rigid. This can't be preserved all that long, but it's tastier than jerky. If you're going to eat it right away, then I recommend having it like this.”

“Hmm. There's a lot of variety, huh?”

I shaved off pieces of meat, then cut them into appropriately sized bits before striking them with a knife to mince it. It sounded simple, but it was rather involving work. I found it tiring, so Rose offered to switch out with me.



“Thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have more strength than you, and I don’t get tired. I don’t understand taste, so nothing can be done about that, but please leave this manner of simple work to me.”

We didn’t have to worry about being watched here, so Rose took off her long gloves that had been hiding her joints and began striking the meat atop the cutting board in a fixed rhythm using the cooking knife. Because of her maid outfit, the scene looked just right.

“Creating something on my own like I usually do is enjoyable, but I see working on something with everyone as a group is also fun in an entirely different way.”

Rose couldn’t discern the difference between crafting and cooking, seeing that she didn’t understand the concept of eating food. Just as she’d said, it really looked like she was having fun.

“We’re in the middle of a journey, so we can’t really spend much time like this...” Rose said, “but if we’re able to settle down in Aker, I wonder if this will become an everyday thing.”

“An everyday thing?”

“Yes. Oh. The other day, I had the opportunity to speak with my master about what we’re to do after all this.”

“With Majima-senpai?” I asked, caught a little off guard by this.

“Yes. Since arriving in Aker, my master has been giving thought to the future.”

In a sense, that was a perfectly natural development. After the huge disaster of being teleported to this world, we had been desperate just trying to resolve what was directly in front of us. He’d had no other choice. However, those times had passed now. Considering that Majima-senpai traveled with monsters, he couldn’t help but think about the future.

I felt hope in that, but also fear. I was happy with my current lifestyle. Even so, nothing remained unchanging in this world. Our journey would one day come to an end. My time with Majima-senpai and Rose couldn’t go on forever.

“What does Senpai...no, not just him, what do all of you intend to do?”

“My master said he would be fine living a quiet life working the fields or something. As for me...I haven’t really given it much consideration until now,” Rose answered thoughtfully without stopping her hands. “But my master suggested I put my skills as a crafter to use and try opening a shop. I also believe it wouldn’t be bad to give it a try.”

“Wow! That’s a great idea!” Kei agreed with a smile. “I’m sure everyone will be crazy for the stuff you make! You’ll be so popular!”

“That would be nice,” Rose said.

“Have you decided what kind of shop you want to open yet?” Kei asked. “The capital is the biggest city in Aker, but even if you don’t settle down there, it’ll be better to open a shop somewhere at least the size of Diospyro.”

“I haven’t thought of the details yet... In truth, there are still many problems.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I still lack a fundamental understanding of human society. I can’t do calculations involving money either. Wouldn’t that be a problem for opening a shop?”

“Oh, is that all?” Kei said, her cheerful expression a complete contrast to Rose’s sullen tone. “You can leave that kind of stuff to Takahiro.”

“To my master?” Rose repeated in astonishment.

Kei nodded. “You mentioned he’d be fine with working the fields or something, but it’s not like he aspires to be a farmer. In that case, this could work too, right? Takahiro can be the manager while you make things. Judging by his personality, he wouldn’t be good at handling the sly merchants of the Empire, but Aker is a small country. To make a steady living, an honest personality is more important than cunning. He’s also got connections to the commander.”

Kei was quite shrewd despite her age. Although, children couldn’t remain children all that long in this world. Perhaps it was only normal she would acquire such knowledge this early.

“I see. I have no intention of parting ways with my master, so that might be a good idea. That is, of course, if my master wishes to. It’s worth speaking to him about it, at least.”

“Oh, right. In that case, how about having Gerbera sell the clothes she makes in the shop too?” Kei added.

“Gerbera?”

“Yup. Everyone can open a store together. Right, Mana? Doesn’t it sound like a good idea?” Kei said, taking a stab at rousing my interest.

Having been unable to participate in their conversation up until now, I smiled in a flustered way.

“Yeah. I think that sounds nice.”

My answer came after a brief pause. I’d been thinking of where I would be at that time.

“Mana? Is something the matter?” Rose asked curiously.

“No, it’s nothing,” I answered with a smile.

“Okay then.”

Fortunately, I managed to dodge the question.

“In that case, Mana will be the clerk,” Rose continued with a nod. “I’ve heard clerks in your world must wear some kind of uniform. Shall we ask Gerbera to make you one?”

“What?” I didn’t expect that at all. “Is it fine for me to be included?”

“Huh? Do you not want to be?” Rose said in astonishment, as if I’d said something strange. “Kei said ‘everyone can open a store together,’ and you said ‘that sounds nice,’ didn’t you?”

“I did, but...”

“Or is there something else you wish to do? In that case, there’s no helping it...”

“N-N-No! No! That’s not the case!”

“That’s good. If we are to sell Gerbera’s clothes, then there will be many different goods to handle. Managing the store is sure to be difficult, but if you are helping us too, Mana, then it will be a relief,” she said with a smile.

Rose had gotten considerably better at smiling naturally. She then held out the chopping board with the mincemeat on it. I took it from her, and a moment later, emotions that had been gradually growing deep within my chest began seeping out. I felt a sudden urge to cry.

“Y-You’ve crushed it up all nicely. Okay then, next we need to cut the vegetables.”

I hurried on to the next task at hand. That was the only way I could hold back my tears.



After we finished the mincemeat salad, we moved on to the last part of the meal. It was time for the bag of potato flour that Rose had brought us earlier.

“Okay, Mana,” Kei said. “Please start by spreading the flour over that iron plate.”

“Huh? As it is?”

“Yup.”

“Will that be fine?”

“It will.”

I believed in her confidence and did as I was told. After that, I added a little water, just the tiniest amount. The trick was to not add too much.

“It looks just like flour... Actually, it feels exactly like flour. Is this really going to be okay?” I asked again.

“Yes. That’s just about the right amount.”

I continued to believe in her and put it over the fire. As I did, a change occurred.

“Hmm. As it cooks, it looks less and less like flour, huh?” I commented.

“Keep it up just like that, please.”

“Got it.”

Now all I had to do was wait until it had to be taken off the heat. Shortly after, it finished baking, so I placed some of the mincemeat salad on top of it and folded the bread.

“It’s done, right?” I asked.

“Yes!”

Kei walked up to me, and we joined hands and cheered. While we were at it, we got Rose to join us. Maybe we were exaggerating a little, but this kind of atmosphere was important. All that was left was to make the rest the same way.

As I started baking another one, Shiran came in.

“I’ve returned.”

“Welcome back, Shiran!”

Shiran had just gotten back to the house. She was very popular, so she had gotten held up with the villagers as they all spoke with her. Seeing that she was back, it meant that quite a lot of time had passed.

“Sorry, Shiran,” I said. “Things are going a little slow, but we’re just about done.”

“Huh? Oh, it’s fine. I don’t mind,” she replied. For a moment, she looked like she had no idea what I was saying, but then she shook her head. “Takahiro may be getting hungry, though. Shall we eat right when we can?”

“Right, Senpai is...”

My movements came to a sudden halt.

“Is something the matter?” Shiran asked curiously.

I couldn’t answer. I’d just realized I had completely forgotten about something tremendously important, after all.



During our journey, Lily had always been in charge of preparing our meals. It had been a bit of an inevitability. Among our group in the Woodlands, Rose

didn't understand the concept of eating meals, Gerbera couldn't understand the necessity of cooking, and there was a time where everyone had been suspicious of me, so I hadn't been in a position to make any of Majima-senpai's food.

After we reached Fort Tilia, the situation had changed. Shiran, Kei, and I had ended up helping out with the cooking. However, the main chef had always been Lily. Perhaps this was a bit of an exaggeration, but in my heart, this had become something like sacred soil. But tonight, I made dinner. That inevitably meant Majima-senpai would eat it. The thought of him eating something I made felt very special to me. I couldn't possibly remain calm.

"Just by the fact that you're bringing this up, doesn't it mean you already knew this?" Shiran asked.

"Mana has a bad habit of putting others before herself..." Rose replied.

"I was wondering for a bit there whether you noticed it," Kei added. "So you really didn't?"

Everyone was trying to say something to me, but I didn't have the composure to process any of it.

"Wh-What do I do, Rose?" I pleaded with my friend.

"What do you mean? We're going to have dinner, right?"

"Th-That's true, but wait a minute. I'm not mentally prepared..."

"We can't wait, Mana. The food you went out of your way to make will get cold."

Rose asked Kei and Shiran to help carry the meal over and pushed me from behind. There was a gentleness to it accompanied by a difficult-to-defy strength.

"Come now, Mana. My master is waiting. Let's go."

"Huh...? I feel like I've seen this scene before," Kei muttered, putting her finger to her lip and cocking her head.

What a coincidence. I also remembered seeing it before. It had been in Diospyro, on the day of Rose's date. The actors had been none other than Rose

and me, but now our roles were reversed.

By the time we reached Majima-senpai's room, I was about as nervous as I could be.

"Oh. You're done. Thanks for the hard work."

"Ssster."

He had apparently been playing with Asarina while waiting for us.

As I got pushed into the room, Asarina stretched out to me in high spirits. She peered at my face and cocked her head with a "Sster?" She remained perfectly still for several seconds, but then she went back to Majima-senpai with a "Sssteer." Perhaps she was being considerate of me.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Master," Rose said.

Majima-senpai shook his head. "It's fine. I had Asarina to keep me company. Besides, it looks like it was worth the wait. It smells great."

He was probably just making a casual remark, but I felt the hurdle get even higher.

"Mana made it herself. Please look forward to it."

And then the hurdle went up another notch. Rose had no ill intent, but she lacked restraint in equal measure. Still pushing on my back, she crossed the room and sat me down in a chair. One beat later, I noticed I was seated in front of Majima-senpai. This had surely been Rose's form of consideration. I was getting dizzy. Just like that, I'd been driven into a corner of my own making.

Kei set the table in front of us. Everything was ready. Well, everything except my heart. Despite what he'd said, Majima-senpai was probably hungry.

"Okay, let's eat. Thanks for the meal," he said the moment things were ready.

He reached his hand toward the food. I held my breath and watched him. He took a single bite of the bread in his hands. The seconds he spent chewing felt like eternity. My pounding heart hurt.

"H-H-H-How i-i-is it?" I asked, mustering all of my resolve.

He looked my way and gulped what he had in his mouth.

“Mm. It’s delicious,” he said casually—and in the next instant, a huge sigh of relief filled the room.

It wasn’t just me. Shiran and Kei were also relieved. It didn’t show in Rose’s body language, but she seemed satisfied too. Apparently, my nervousness had influenced everyone. Only Majima-senpai was surprised.

“Huh...? What’s up?” he asked.

“It’s nothing. Nothing at all,” Shiran said.

“Thank goodness...” Kei said with another sigh.

“What’s with all of you...?”

Majima-senpai remained bewildered by the two elves’ reactions.

“Anyway, this really is tasty,” he said, pulling himself back together.

It was his honest opinion. He went right back to eating. That simple action made my heart tighten.

“It’s not like the stuff we got in town was bad, but there were parts of it that were hard to eat. This doesn’t have any of that. Mm, definitely great.”

Majima-senpai reached his hand out for seconds when his eyes stopped on me.

“Are you not having any, Katou?”

“Oh, um, I...”

“Mana sampled it several times to adjust the seasoning, so she’s already full,” Rose said for me, seeing that I was hemming and hawing.

The salad was made up of mincemeat and chopped vegetables. After we mixed in the boiled potatoes, we’d added small amounts of dehydrated herbs and berries. This was a type of spice that Kei and Shiran had laboriously gathered during our journey. In Aker, the type and amount of spice used defined the taste of a household.

Majima-senpai and I came from the same city, so our palates were similar to an extent. At the very least, we weren’t separated by countries or worlds. To us, spices that had a peculiar or even foul scent to them would take us a while to

get used to. Hence, I had managed to avoid using them.

“Having said that, it’s not like I was the only one adjusting things by taste,” I said. “Kei was doing it with me. Actually, Kei’s contributions might be far greater...”

“What are you saying?” Kei said. “All I did was help give your opinions shape.”

“Is that so? You really gave it your all for this, huh?” Majima-senpai said, turning my way. “Thank you, Katou. It might be a little shameless, but I’d be happy if you could make this for me again some time.”

“Sure, Senpai... With pleasure.”

My chest felt full to bursting. I cast my eyes down. I felt like I understood a little of what Rose had said. We still didn’t know what the future had in store for us, but if we could spend every day like this, it would be really nice.

“Isn’t this great, Mana?” Rose said with a smile.

“Yes,” I replied with a hearty nod.

After that, all the female members of our group, including Lily, held cooking classes once in a while, but that is a story for another time.

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ROSE

MAGICAL PUPPET

“Rose...?”

MAJIMA TAKAHIRO

2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT



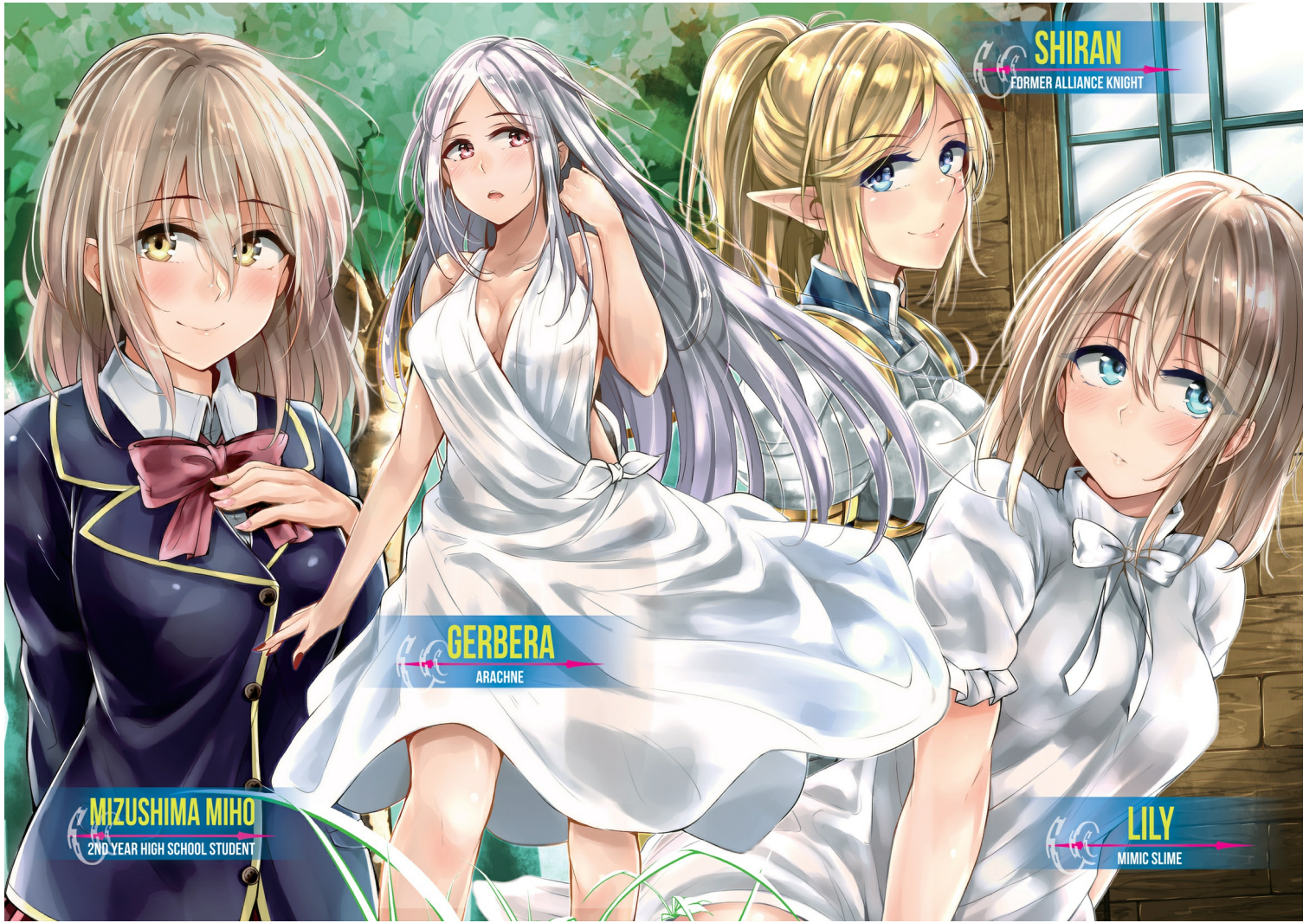
KATOU MANA

1ST YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

“I hope it
goes well
for those
two...”

KEI

ELF



SHIRAN
FORMER ALLIANCE KNIGHT

GERBERA
ARACHNE

MIZUSHIMA MIHO
2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

LILY
MIMIC SLIME

[Is that
your true
form,
Berta?]



BERTA
SCYLLA



AYAME
BLOWFOX

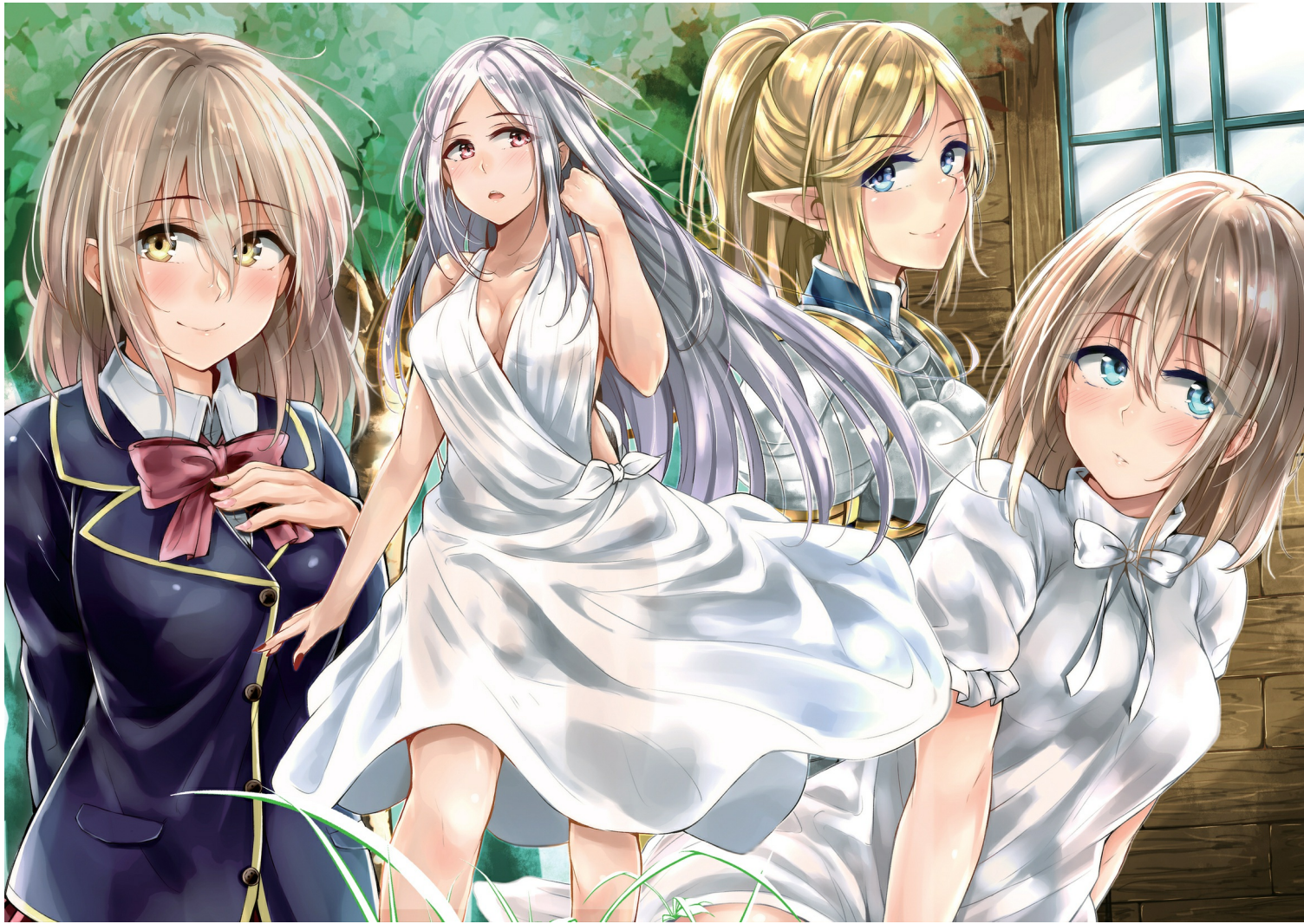
“It really
is more
comfortable
like this.”



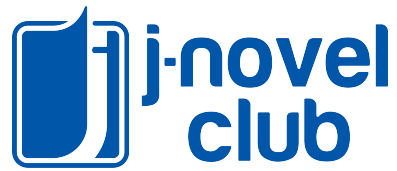












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by Minto Higure

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